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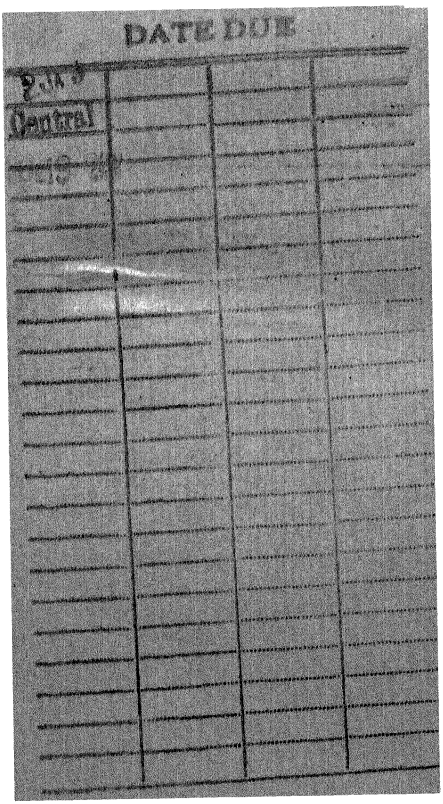

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THE MARSH ARAB

HAJI RIKKAN

By

FULANAIN

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
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1928

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DEDICATION

PREFACE

OWING to her untimely death, this book which was first undertaken at her suggestion appears without the fore-word promised by Miss Gertrude Lowthian Bell; but a grateful acknowledgement may still be made of her interest and encouragement.

The Arab tribes of 'Iraq, differing widely as they do in details of custom, speech, and manners, remain in the essentials of thought and conduct homogeneous; and the two great tribal confederations with which this book deals—the Albu Mohammad and the Bani Lām—may justly claim to be representative of every aspect of tribal life. The country which they people, lying astride the Tigris from Kut-al-Amara in the north to Qurna in the south, embraces wide deserts for the shepherd and camel-breeding tribes, fertile fields for the tillers of the soil, boundless swamp for the marsh-dwellers; and into these three classes the tribespeople throughout 'Iraq may be roughly grouped. It is hoped that this book, though its central figure is drawn from the wildest and most primitive, as it is the least

known of these divisions, may present a not inaccurate picture of Arab tribal life as a whole, and represent in some measure the outlook and mentality and scale of values, so different from our own, of this inarticulate people whose fortunes, since the War first brought them into close contact with our civilization, have been bound up with ours.

The reader will catch glimpses here and there of the difficulties which face the young administration of 'Iraq, the prejudices and conflicting tendencies with which she is gallantly and successfully attempting to deal. Contrasts between the present and the days of Turkish dominion, drawn spontaneously by the outspoken simplicity of the tribesmen, are enough to show how much has already been accomplished; how infinitely much remains to be done, the reader of these pages will appreciate.

Cordial thanks are due to the many 'Iraq friends who, wittingly or unwittingly, have by story-telling and by patiently elucidating or confirming points of detail contributed to this book. To the kind and unsparing critic who commented upon its pages when in typescript a debt of affectionate gratitude is warmly acknowledged.

BAGHDAD

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THE MARSH ARAB

Chapter I

THE PEDDLER

STANDING in the prow of his uncle's bitumen-coated *birkash,* Bahalul bent leisurely to his pole; in the stern sat his twin brother, Jahalul, guiding the clumsy craft with deft strokes of his paddle. They followed a narrow water-way which twisted and turned between walls of high green reeds. From a sky a shade less blue than the still marsh water, a brilliant sun shone down on the brown bodies of the brothers, naked but for a cloak of coarse wool twisted round the waist. It bronzed the rusty paraffin tins containing the tea, coffee, spices, and flaked tobacco which comprised the stock in trade of Haji Rikkan, and warmed the bones of the old peddler himself as he sat cross-legged in the "belly" of the boat. From my place facing him I watched the changeful monotony of the marsh, the wilderness of reeds and water in which I was privileged to accompany his wanderings. A

cool breeze stirred the feathery, dun-coloured heads of the tall reeds, the water sighed and lapped among their roots, no louder sound than the ripple from Jahalul's paddle broke the intense quiet of the spring day.

Behind me Jahalul began to sing. "Braying forcedly in the nose" is Doughty's unkind description of the singing of the Arabs; but the plaintive air which, beginning in a burst of sound, rose and fell mournfully until it died away on the sub-dominant, a long-drawn note only terminated by the failure of the singer's breath, was far from being to my ears a "hideous desolation." Of the words I could distinguish few, until Haji Rikkan repeated the rhyming lines.

"An exaggeration," he said, with a laugh that was half apologetic, half defensive, for the Arabs have a high regard for their poets and their poetry.

Jahalul sang to the woman he loved. The words were in the homely marsh dialect despised by purer-speaking Arabs, but they clothed a romantic idealism in strange contrast with the rough and primitive conditions of human life in the marshes.

"As one the cannon strikes, stricken am I
Now that thy cheeks, like apple-blossom fair,
Or flower of pomegranate, are far away.
So fragile are thy slender shoulders, sweet,
That e'en the lightest silken veil would bruise
And chafe the skin of my most lovely one."

Not once, but many times the gentle, droning voice of Jahalul repeated the song, until it was cut short by an abrupt order from Haji Rikkan.

"Bank in!"

We had left behind the narrow channel with its flanking ramparts of reeds, and had come out into a clearing of open water, above the surface of which barely rose the flat shapes of two low islands. To the nearest of these Jahalul turned the boat, and as the high curved prow ran aground the elder twin shipped his pole, leapt lightly out, and splashing back through the water joined his brother in the stern. The two began to chat together in low tones, as though this banking in on a lonely and deserted islet were an occurrence to which they were accustomed.

Haji Rikkan, holding out upturned palms, began to recite.

"In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, . . . Master of the day of requital

. . ."—the rest of the muttered invocation was lost in his beard. He sat for a while, silently contemplating the barren islands; then a brisk *"Y'Allah!"* sent his nephews to their places, and the boat, gliding across the open water, slid once more into the cool shadows of one of the by-ways of the marsh.

"Dost ask why I have said the *Fatihah?"* said Haji Rikkan. "Ask rather why in my wanderings I am accompanied by my two nephews, not by my grown sons. Where are they? May thy head be whole! Because of a man's love for a woman my breast is straitened with grief, and loneliness fills my heart. Sorrow has been mine since the days when Shaikh Saihud fought against the Turks, and fleeing, sought refuge in Huwaiza. Many of his following went with him, and among them one Tahir. Now 'Addai bin Sa'dun, who was my friend, loved this man's daughter; and one day he came to me, saying, 'I would cross the marsh to visit Tahir, but my tribe is at feud with the Albu Ghanam, and I fear to meet them. Let me travel under thy *tisyar*—thy protection—and I shall cross in safety. For this service I will give thee what thou askest.'

"'Willingly,' I replied. 'Talk not of the price; I may yet require a like service of thee.'

"We set out on that journey, he and I together. On the second day we passed two men hunting fish with their spears, and one of them called aloud, ''Addai bin Sa'dun, thou?'

"*'Ee,'* he replied, for it had been shame to deny his name.

"'Hast dared to come here?' cried the fisherman, and 'Addai replied, 'I am ready.'

"'Hast forgotten the feud?' the other called again, and again 'Addai answered, 'I am ready.'

"Seeing their threatening looks, I spoke, telling the men that he was under my protection; but one replied, 'We do not recognize thy *tisyar*. Prepare, O 'Addai!'

"'Stay in thy place, stay!' I cried. 'Come not nearer, or my tribe will claim *hashim,'*—for by our custom a woman must be paid in compensation, if he who goes under protection is but threatened.

"'I care not, my blood is hot,' shouted the fisherman, he who had first called to us; and with that he hurled his fishing spear at 'Addai, and leapt back into the reeds. I fired, but they escaped untouched.

"The spear had passed through his body, and because of the barbs I could not draw it out; so I held the shaft in my hand to ease his pain, and bade my two sons paddle swiftly to the nearest village to find a smith who would cut off the barbs. But when we reached the village, we were told that the smith had gone to a neighbouring tribe; and as we followed him, 'Addai died, calling for Khadija whom he loved.

"Quickly we returned to our tribe, and told the headmen what had befallen. Now the custom of the marsh is clear on such a matter: if a man under our protection is killed, we must fight for a day to avenge his death; aye, the Albu Ghanam must fight with us for the space of a day, or if they would not fight they must pay us forty women, leaving their islands for three days that we might pound our coffee there, and show to all men that they were beaten and broken. But we are not without pride, even we of the marshes, and no tribe has been known to submit to that humiliation.

"Our headmen therefore planted war-flags before their houses, and messengers were sent to call in all the tribesmen. We laid our plans, and when the day came we met the Albu Ghanam in battle—on the two islands which we

left but now. But they were prepared for us, and were more numerous than we, so that after a bitter struggle our people broke at last and fled, leaving many dead and wounded.

"In the evening I returned with some others to the islands under the protection of a Saiyid.

" 'A truce, a truce,' he called aloud, that all the Albu Ghanam might hear. 'It is I, Saiyid Sadiq, who am come to bury the dead and bear away the wounded.'

"Soon I found Mataghar, the youngest of my three sons.

" 'Bring my brothers to me,' he whispered, 'for I am dying.'

"I searched among the fallen and found Mohammad, dead. Long I sought for Khalaf, calling him by name, until I saw some of our tribe dragging a body from the water. 'Who, who?' I cried. 'We cannot see,' they answered. I held a torch of flaming reeds, and saw the face of Khalaf. *Y'abouya, y'abouya!* All three sons dead! From that hour I became as thou seest me now, an old man, white-bearded. Because 'Addai loved Khadija, my sons were lost to me. But why speak I thus? It was so decreed from the beginning."

Silence followed Haji Rikkan's tale. Slowly

the boat glided over the clear water, unruffled and smooth as a mirror, and green with the reflection of the thick reeds. Patches of flowering weeds, pink and white, floated here and there on its surface, swaying gently as we passed. Smiling, serene, untroubled the marsh seemed under the radiant sky, a haven of quiet and peace, a refuge from the world; yet the grief of human hearts was here, and the wilderness of reeds did but hide the despair and endurance of men.

We had travelled all day, and had seen no faces but each other's. Now we began to come upon traces of habitation. The reeds were trampled down in patches; a group of water-buffaloes, half-submerged, were browsing among the rushes; we heard voices, and with unexpected suddenness the high reeds fell away on either side, as we came out into open water.

Facing us was a group of the strange mounds or *ishans* which here and there, in the marshes of Southern 'Iraq, stand out high, or seeming high in that vast watery expanse. On these, the remains of ancient cities, where once rich men feasted under the sway of mighty Babylon, or Abbasid merchants bartered their goods, the marshman builds his hut. Alike in pattern but

varying in size, the huts are of the simplest construction; bundles of tall reeds are bent and fixed to the ground to form a tunnel-shaped framework, over which are thrown a number of mats of plaited reeds. At one end is a low and narrow aperture which serves as doorway, window, and chimney combined; on the rush-strewn and miry floor sleep men and women, children and buffaloes, in warm proximity.

Here dirt and disease should have given death an easy victory, yet here was life triumphant. On this bright morning the houses, closely huddled together, looked picturesque enough to make one forget the wretched conditions in which their owners live. In this malarious swamp, tormented by flies and by the insects innumerable bred in the mud—the ground of his hut often oozing water at every step, and every sanitary precaution neglected—the Marsh Arab attains a surprisingly high physical level. It is a case of the survival of the fittest, for the infant mortality is appalling; but those who survive to maturity have hardened in the process. Under the scorching sun of summer and in the bitterly cold winter winds alike, they are content with one scanty garment, or with none. The men are thickset and muscular, powerful swim-

mers and capable of great endurance, though lazy enough when work is not absolutely necessary. With their strong, well-built bodies, flashing white teeth, and thick black hair worn in two plaits, the *Ma'dan* or Marsh Arabs compare favourably with the townsmen, and need not fear comparison with the pure-bred tribesmen of the desert.

To my eyes, fresh from the soft tones of the marsh, the village seemed full of colour. The yellow reeds of the newer huts gleamed against the sky, and the swinging draperies of the women who moved to and fro between them were gaily red, blue, and orange. The sturdy women of the *Ma'dan,* dark-eyed and warmly brown in colouring, are often handsome, even beautiful, though they age early. In contrast with the men's, their dress is ample and copious, high to the neck and trailing on the ground. The old crones who squatted at the doors of the huts were dressed in sombre, dingy black, with heavy swathed turbans of black stuff on their heads. Under the prows of a row of moored *mashhufs,* a group of village children played in comfortable nakedness.

Mashhufs abounded, for every household must possess its means of transport—the only

means in these three million acres of trackless swamp. The marsh itself supplies most of the simple needs of the marshman: reeds and rushes provide shelter, bedding, and fuel, baskets, ropes, and fodder for the buffaloes whose milk, eaten curdled, is with the abundant fish his staple diet. By the sale of reeds, either as fuel for brick-kilns, or plaited into the mats used throughout 'Iraq for a variety of purposes, he obtains money for the purchase of such small luxuries as those sold by Haji Rikkan, or of the rifle which, in this land of blood-feuds, no man can afford to be without.

The marshman's household goods are of the scantiest. At the first hint of danger he can pile them all into his boat, roll up the mats which make his house, and driving his buffaloes before him retire to the heart of his swampy fastness, there to defy the outside world as he has done for centuries past.

We approached the largest *ishan,* where a group of women were busy at the water's edge with their black cooking-pots. These were the Haji's prospective customers, and he hailed them with the traditional call of his profession.

"Come, O women, come! Tea, sugar, coffee, tobacco. Cucumbers and onions, weight for

weight with rice. O comely ones! Henna and perfumes. Dates, sweet dates—exchange rice for dates, twice their weight in rice. Mirrors for brides—needles, thread, combs. Come, O women! Pretty ones, come!"

Trade did not seem very brisk. A few women came to the boat with shallow baskets of rice on their heads, and squatted on the bank to bargain. One man had a badger's skin to barter, an old woman a sack of feathers; but the day's trading was soon done. Haji Rikkan continued to call his wares round the other islands, but there was no answering hail. In a few minutes Bahalul turned the boat's head, and the high reeds soon hid the village from our sight.

"By Hasan and Husain, in these days there is no money in all 'Iraq," muttered Haji Rikkan. "I am become like the bathman's donkey, which does but carry fuel to the fire, and ashes from the fire."

"Or like the camel," put in Bahalul, his impassive and sternly-cut face lighting up as it always did when he was moved to infrequent speech, "which carries dates, but eats thorn."

"Eh wah, eh wah," the Haji assented. "My labours bring me no profit. As the saying goes,

Like 'Abbas abu 'Arar,
Fifty years a soldier,
Yet still *nafar nafar.*

"Ah, well, Allah is bountiful."

With this Haji Rikkan threw off the troubles of the world, and we relapsed into silence and our own thoughts. Mine were busy with the strange contrast between the squalor I had just seen—the filth and ignorance which made the people's lives little better than those of the animals which shared their huts—and the Haji's story of devotion to an ideal, of lives given freely to avenge a stranger whose protection was a matter of honour. Was it, I wondered, a sign that the people of this land might yet become a great nation; or was it the last glimmer of a noble past in a decadent race?

What were the thoughts of Haji Rikkan and of Bahalul, I do not know. Jahalul's were where they had been all day, and once more his voice rose in doleful song, the last sighing notes drowned by the evening trilling of the marsh's myriad frogs.

"Fourteen thy days, O lovely moon at full;
Fourteen the years of my gazelle-eyed love;
Yet brighter far her face, more beautiful.

"Two red lips hast thou not, O moon above,
Thou hast not teeth like whitest pearls arrayed,
Nor braided plaits like those which deck my love."

Chapter II

ACROSS THE MARSH

BASKING in the quiet warmth of the April afternoon, the whole village drowsed. Across the water which separated Haji Rikkan's solitary hut from the rest of the crowded community, only one sound floated lazily—the hum of a *majrasha* which showed that somewhere a woman was busy husking rice. Only on our own small island was there stir and bustle, for preparations were on foot for a long journey, the longest I had yet taken with the old peddler.

Hospitality among the Arabs of the desert has become a byword; yet it is not a whit less common among the humbler folk of the marsh, despised and wretched as they are. In the poorest household any small store of butter or other luxury which may have come its way is jealously reserved; and to-day, though meat is the rarest of luxuries, the Haji had killed a lamb in honour of his guest.

Within the hut the women were busy over

the fire. The Haji, Bahalul, and myself sat on a worn strip of carpet in the shade of the hut, doing nothing as became the dignity of our sex. Jahalul strolled restlessly here and there, a naked dagger in his hand; for he was newly wed, and to such the *jinns* are always malevolently disposed.

His bride, silently contemplating her world, sat in the Haji's boat, which was moored to the low bank. She seemed to be using the still water as a mirror in which to survey and enjoy her wedding finery. The simple, widely fashioned garments, made up from cotton stuff bought in the nearest riverside market, would all too soon become faded, draggled, and dirty; but for a few days their crude colours were bright and gay in the sunshine. She was a pretty girl, sturdily built, barely fifteen; a deep fringe of black hair hid her forehead, a silver ring set with blue stones was in her nose, and her chin was decorated with indigo tattooing.

Perfect peace brooded over the village as the warm afternoon drew to a close. The yellow and brown huts were sharply outlined against the deep blue of the sky. A group of buffaloes, their bodies submerged, showed motionless black heads above the surface of the water. The soft

chatter of women inside Haji Rikkan's hut seemed hardly to ruffle the silence.

"Fitna, O Fitna!"—one of the voices was raised shrilly. "Bring from the *birkash* two baskets of rice."

"I, when I am not yet out of my seven days?" replied the bride with indignation.

"No matter, no matter," called the older woman indulgently. "I will fetch the rice myself."

Here Haji Rikkan broke into the conversation.

"What, more rice? All I had thou didst take three days ago. O shameless! While I am absent on my journeys thou sellest for thyself that which I have grown weary in getting. At thine ease dost thou eat, while I—daughter of sixteen donkeys, why didst not say it was for the guest? Two baskets? Go, fetch, four, fetch eight, nay, empty the *birkash*—take all!"

"O generous!" said the woman. "The lamb will be well stuffed."

"Aye, stuff it well, O mother of 'Ubaid. Spare not the almonds nor the onions. Go, my daughter, fetch sultanas from the boat, from the tin next the sugar. Spare not the spice, be lavish with the cloves and the pepper. Forget not the

kirkum nor the *krafus*. The tin is empty, daughter? No matter, it is as Allah willed. May He strengthen you, my sisters!" And the women bustled about their tasks, while Haji Rikkan puffed reflectively at the reed stem of his hubble-bubble of mud.

That evening several of the village elders were invited to partake of the Haji's hospitality. Had not a lamb been killed?—a lamb which in retrospect would soon grow into a sheep, slain in honour of an occasion which would in time be referred to as "the day on which I killed three sheep in honour of the Sahib's visit." Haji Rikkan's gnarled hand pulled limb from limb; with his fingers he tore the tenderest pieces of meat from the back of the roasted lamb, and handed them to me with a great fistful of the stuffing.

The rice was well cooked, but of the almonds, sultanas, and spices which go to make up the stuffing at the meals of richer men there was no sign. It was not that the Haji's orders had been disobeyed: he had never meant them to be literally interpreted, for such luxuries were far beyond the reach of his household. The desert Arab gives ungrudgingly of his scanty best, and to excuse the plainness of the repast will say

simply, "We are poor"; but the Marsh Arab, more imaginative or more boastful, is apt to shout to servants he does not possess, and to order food he has not got, in an attempt to show that, though straitened circumstances make its complete fulfilment impossible, the hospitality of his intention is ungrudging.

The remnants of our food were left to reward the labours of the women who had cooked it. Not even the humblest Arab of the marsh would deign to eat with his wife. "We sleep in the same bed as our womenfolk," said the Haji once, "but eat with them? No, that were too great a disgrace."

Early the next morning we set out on our journey across the marsh. The young *bardi* through which we passed first was a sheet of vivid green, unrelieved by any brown or faded tints, for the *Ma'dan* each year burn down the old rushes to encourage the new growth, raising great pillars of smoke which are often seen and wondered at by passengers on the distant river. Gradually the *bardi* gave way to taller reeds. The channel we followed wound its sinuous way between high walls of impenetrable thickness, which sheltered us at once from the

sun and from the gusty south wind which had sprung up in the early morning.

"As the talk comes, so thou wishest me to speak?" asked Haji Rikkan suddenly, breaking a long silence; and to my *"Na'm"*—Yes—replied with a common play upon words. *"Na'm Allah 'aliak"*—Allah's blessing upon thee.

Haji Rikkan was gifted with a rough eloquence which he loved to exercise. His natural intelligence, always above the average, had been sharpened by contact with the world outside the marshes, and he had besides a fund of simple knowledge and tribal lore far above that possessed by most of the *Ma'dan*. His ready tongue and tenacious memory—the accurate memory of those who can neither read nor write—made him the most entertaining of companions; but long silences caused him no embarrassment, and we often travelled for hours together without a word, until some trivial occurrence, some sight or casual thought, unloosed his tongue. Direct questioning soon wearied him, and his best talk was the unpremeditated expression of his moment's mood.

Now it was a long-legged bird, flapping out of the reeds with a startled, angry cry at our

intrusion on its peace, which moved the Haji to speech.

"Most Great is Allah, most Great is Allah!" he exclaimed. "To raise his tent man must have ropes and poles of wood, yet Allah's tent is stretched above us without either. There it remains, lit night by night, while the palaces of the kings of former days are crumbled into dust. Lord of the Worlds is He, Creator of how many kinds of creatures, on each of which He has bestowed instinct approaching the knowledge of man! The ant stores for the coming winter, the mouse knows the cat for its foe, and that bird—(it was a kind of heron)—knows how to guard itself as would a man. At night, when the flock would sleep, one bird is chosen as sentry; all sleep but he, who must place the sole of one foot against the knee of the other leg, so that if he sleep he falls. And if one of their number is killed because of the negligence of the sentry, then the whole flock seek him out and peck him to death."

How much of the Haji's natural history was observation, how much imagination, I could not say; but his rambling talk soon left the subject.

"Most Great is Allah! To the animals and

birds he has given instinct, to man knowledge; but of what avail knowledge without experience? There was once a great man called Harun al Rashid, a sultan he was, and a powerful. He had a son who studied for twenty years, until he had more knowledge than his teachers. The sultan, seeing this——"

The story was interrupted by the passing of another *birkash,* in which the rusty tins and the sugar cones in their thick blue paper were arranged in the same way as were the Haji's. There in the bow was the same rolled-up reed mat ready to protect the precious stock from rain, and rising from the middle the same stripped branch, in the fork of which were hung half a dozen red glass bracelets in a primitive attempt at window-dressing.

It was evident from Haji Rikkan's uncomplimentary remarks that this rival craft belonged to, or was financed by, a non-Muslim. His pungent curses on Jews and Christians alike were felt to need no apology to me, for all Englishmen he regarded as members of the "British religion," one inferior to Islam, but far superior to the local Christianity. Harun al Rashid forgotten, Haji Rikkan now began to

talk of a celebrated Saiyid who was buried on one of the many mounds along the river bank.

"But for the trickery of a Christian—may his grave be defiled!—Saiyid Khalifa would have died a rich man. It was his custom to go about the marshes as I do, selling not sugar, tea, and coffee, but pieces of Heaven. Because he was a holy man, descended from our Prophet, the tribesmen believed that he could indeed do this; and one who had bought a piece of Heaven big enough for himself would proceed to save enough to buy a piece for his wife, and another for his family. When Heaven was being sold piecemeal, who had money to spare for spices and tobacco? Thus that Christian merchant who was accustomed to send men into the marshes to sell his goods began to lose his trade, until at length he devised a plan.

"Going to the Saiyid with all due humility, he said that though as a Christian he could not buy a piece of Heaven, yet might he buy a piece of Hell—or all of it, if so much were for sale? Gladly the Saiyid gave him a deed saying that the whole of Hell was his. Then the Christian sent out many *mashhuf*-loads of his goods among the tribes, bidding his peddlers announce his

purchase to every one. The tribesmen were not slow to see the meaning: if the whole of Hell was taken, they could but go to Heaven. Why then pay? Thus Saiyid Khalifa sold no more pieces of Heaven."

So talked the Haji, on every subject ready with his simple say. His deep, resonant voice, the expressive gestures of his eloquent hands, an occasional twinkle in the dark eyes which, deep-set by nature, seemed deeper still by reason of the bushy eyebrows overhanging them, gave an indescribable charm to the spoken word. Diffuse and wordy he could be, when not sure of his ground; but when relating his own experiences, or talking on matters of which he had first-hand knowledge, he was terse, vivid, magnificently idiomatic.

We left the sheltering reeds, and entered a broad stream of clear water, the channel running straight ahead as far as the eye could see, as though cut by the hand of man; as indeed it must have been, for it was a fragment of the famous Nahrwan Canal, one of the great irrigation works which of old made Mesopotamia a fertile land. These desolate marshes witnessed the earliest beginnings of flow irrigation.

> Marduk laid a reed upon the face of the waters,
> He formed dust and poured it out beside the reed,
> That he might cause the gods to dwell
> In the place of their hearts' desire.

The early Sumerians began the reclamation of the "Sea-land" by erecting banks of earth and reeds such as the marsh tribes build to this day. From small beginnings the dykes grew in size and extent, until vast areas were enclosed, within which the land was cultivated by means of flow irrigation through cuts in the dykes; cities were built, and temples (the places of their hearts' desire) raised to the gods. All these were below the level of the water, protected from inundation by the strength of the encircling bund.

The present desolation dates from the fifth century, when a weak monarchy resulted in years of neglect, and a sudden flood breached the untended dykes, submerging all the low lands south and west of the Tigris. A stronger king was able to reclaim much of the land, but two centuries later another flood, unprecedented in its violence, broke down the bunds once more. This was only a few years before the Muslim invasion. The Sassanian king, Khasrau Parviz, did what he could; but though he "crucified in one day forty dykemen at a certain breach," he

could not control the waters. After that desolation it was left for the Mongol hordes, a flood more terrible even than the ungovernable waters, finally to destroy the ancient irrigation system, and make the great swamp permanent, accepted, and abandoned.

Soon branching off from our arrow-straight waterway, we began to wind once more among reeds which grew ever taller, until we were surrounded by *mardi,* the giant of the marshes, which provides the *Ma'dan* with their long *mashhuf*-poles; here it towered above our heads to a height of twenty-five feet. Slowly we threaded our way among these silent, stately monarchs of the waste, until, suddenly breaking through the gloom, we came out upon a wide sea of sunny open water, blue as the Mediterranean, and covered with white-crested waves. The wind, which in the shelter of the *mardi* we had not felt, was here blowing freshly, and Haji Rikkan had doubts as to the wisdom of attempting to cross; for the loss of a marsh boat in these squalls of wind is by no means infrequent. In the end he decided to skirt the edge of the reeds, and with a pious "We are all in the hands of Allah" gave the word to cross. Rocking and tossing, and shipping a good deal of water, we

reached the other side in safety, and slid into the calm waters of a channel which wound between walls of *shabab,* the stout but pliable reed from which the marshman makes the arched framework of his hut. Only the waving of their silver feathery heads showed that above the shelter of our little channel the wind blew as strongly as before.

Always changing from hour to hour as we penetrated more and more deeply into its heart, yet always the same, the quiet marsh opened its waterways to receive us. Like some Belle Dame sans Merci, it seemed to beckon us on and on, ever revealing fresh beauties, yet closing fast the way of retreat. Its towering ramparts rose silently behind us as though, having once laid bare the wonders of its inmost hidden life, the marsh would keep us for ever in its embrace, lest we should go forth again and tell the secret of its winds and waters to the world outside.

At last, when to one's lulled senses the whole universe seemed to be made up of murmuring reeds and lapping water, we came to a village, a large settlement on a group of islands.

"*In sh'Allah,*—God willing—I shall profit here," said Haji Rikkan, "for their buffaloes

are good buffaloes, almost as good as those of the Abraiha tribe of Gurmat 'Âli, which may be milked from sunset to the setting of the star Zahra, and even then not be dry."

Many hails of *"Ya Abu Walim!"* greeted us, and the Haji seemed likely to do a brisk trade in this centre of life so far from the beaten track. As was sometimes his custom when a long halt was to be made, he borrowed a *challabiya* from the village, and sent me off with Bahalul and Jahalul to get some shooting.

Back into the heart of the marsh we plunged, the powerful strokes of the brothers sending the tiny, narrow craft through the water at a pace very different from that of the loaded *birkash*. Both heavily built and rather below the middle height, both strikingly muscular even for marshmen, the twins though alike in feature differed widely in character. Jahalul was ready of tongue, quick to see a jest, something of a flatterer, and his uncle's favourite. He wore a thick silver ring, and his nails were dyed with henna, two forms of adornment scorned by the elder twin, who had also shorn the two plaits of hair still worn by Jahalul in common with most young men of his age. Bahalul's stern face seldom relaxed into a smile;

his words were at all times few; yet nothing escaped the vigilance of his dark eyes, and it was to him that Haji Rikkan unfailingly turned for advice in a difficulty.

Duck and teal abounded, and so good was our sport that it was not until I saw Bahalul leaning from the boat to toss up water into his mouth that I was reminded of my own thirst. I was hungry too, but we had left the village without bringing either food or drink. The marsh water was here so salt as to be to me undrinkable; I suggested that we make for the nearest village, where we could be certain of getting it well disguised in the form of tea.

An argument ensued between the brothers. Apparently the nearest village was the one in which we had left Haji Rikkan, by this time far away.

"Wait!" said Bahalul. "The Weeper!"

Jahalul agreed. The Weeper lived quite near.

I was on the point of questioning them, when I remembered that I had heard of an old woman who for years had lived alone in the heart of the marsh, spending every night in weeping and beating her breasts. What, I wondered, had driven her to seek this hermit's life? What

tragedy of fierce love and hate had been witnessed by the marsh, and buried in the deep oblivion of its silence?

Twenty minutes' swift paddling brought us to a small *ishan* marked by a single reed hut. As we neared it, a figure came down to the water's edge and stood waiting—the gaunt, erect figure of a middle-aged woman with strongly-marked features and bright, deep-set eyes. She bade us welcome, and led us to her hut, where she spread a rug for me, bidding the *mashhuf*-men bring cushions from the far end. Apparently our visit did not seem to her strange or even unusual; she asked no questions as to our destination, but quietly set about preparing tea.

Taking a handful of dried reeds, she pushed the ends into the fire, which blazed up merrily round the old black kettle freshly filled with water by Jahalul. From a wooden box she took three small narrow-waisted glasses, washed and shook them dry, and placed them on a metal tray near the fire. From another box she took a solid lump of white sugar, broke it in pieces, and put in each glass a lump large enough nearly to fill it. The kettle began to boil, and the woman shook some tea into an old, broken-spouted tea-pot, poured the water on, and set

it on the fire to brew. For a few more minutes we sat in silence; then she poured tea into the little glasses, and handed one each to me and to Bahalul and his brother, who sat together near the entrance.

So far, beyond the ordinary common-places of greeting, she had said nothing; but now, as the brothers talked in low voices over their tea, the word *majnuna* reached my ears, and hers also.

"Effendim," she said, "in thy country if a great sorrow fills all a woman's thoughts and all her life, is she counted mad?"

I had no answer ready, and she appeared to expect none, but stared into the glowing embers of the fire.

"He was a man!" she said, as if to herself. Then she turned to me with a swift question. "Thou hast heard of him?"

"No," I replied, not knowing of whom she spoke.

"Thou art but a youth," she said, excusing my ignorance. "Yet I remember, as though it had been last year, my first sight of him. That was the year of the great hailstorm, and he sat talking in my father's house. From behind the women's screen I looked at him: what

strength, what mighty limbs! Ah, he was good to look upon, bold of eye, and full-bearded. My heart loved him as I looked.

"Then one day his brother's daughter came to me. 'Ruwaidhi desires thee, he desires thee,' she whispered, and I feared to believe her. But the next day I passed him by the water's brink, and as I passed I heard him say low, 'O beautiful, thou hast killed me!' And drawing my cloak over my face I hastened on.

"After that day we met—no matter how—not once but several times. He wanted to take me to wife, and I was ready, but I feared to tell him. And then, as our custom is, I was bidden with another woman to his house; and I knew that he would watch, and if I ate nothing take the sign that I desired him not. Trembling I stretched forth my hand to the food, and when I had eaten he kissed my mouth."

Her voice died away, and I feared that I should not hear my story after all; but in a few moments she began to speak again.

"Gold, gold! Who made gold? Allah or the Evil One? When they came to ask for me in Ruwaidhi's name, my father wanted seventy golden liras for my price; for he was a proud man, and I was beautiful. How could they

close with so high a price, when Ruwaidhi was penniless? For only a few months before he had given all he had to buy him a wife; but that was before he saw me. All he could borrow and pledge they offered, and one said, 'For my sake, reduce the sum by ten liras,' and another, 'For my sake abate yet another ten'; but my father refused them all. So returning to Ruwaidhi they said, 'All thou didst offer we have offered, and more, yet her father refused. What is thy wish?'

" 'Return again,' said he, 'and whatsoever her father asks, accept that.' And they agreed upon seventy liras.

"It was truly a high price, but I laughed at Ruwaidhi for thinking of the gold. Was I not ready to dare my father's wrath, and go with him whatever might befall us?

" 'Foolish tongue,' he said. 'I want thee not for a day nor a year, but for all time. Shall thy father come and slay thee or me? Mine is a weak tribe; can I see all my kinsfolk slain for a blood-feud of my beginning? Nay, fear not. I will devise a plan to make thee mine without such folly.'

"I knew that he was wise as well as fearless, and I waited, waited patiently though many

weeks went by, for I trusted him. And not in vain, for a day came when he laid before me fifty liras, golden and shining in the sun. 'Whence?' I asked, and he told me.

"He had made a plan with Risan bin Ghachi to steal and sell some buffaloes from the Bait Wuhaib; but they failed, and barely escaped with their lives. As they made their way home in the *mashhuf,* bitterness filled the heart of my lover, and he longed to kill the blundering fool Risan, who had spoiled his plan and lost him the fifty liras of which he thought night and day. No blood-feud would the slaying of Risan bring about, for he was long an outcast from his tribe; and as this thought crossed Ruwaidhi's mind, a new plan came to him, for he remembered the bitter enmity between Shaikh Hasan and Risan son of Ghachi. Ruwaidhi was quick to brain and hand. He said to Risan:

" 'Let us rest awhile at Abu Dhahab.' They kindled a fire with the dry pith of the reeds, and as they sat by it Ruwaidhi returned to the *mashhuf,* fetched his club, and stunned the man. Quickly he bound him, cast him into the boat, and bore him through the marsh until he reached the shaikh's village. He hid the boat in the

reeds, sought Hasan, and offered him the life of his enemy for fifty liras.

"'No more than twenty is the dog's life worth,' said the shaikh. But Ruwaidhi was firm, and after much talk they struck a bargain. Hasan should kill the man with his own hand, and for his price forty-eight liras and a silver ring should be Ruwaidhi's. Together they went to the boat, but not until my lover had waited while the shaikh brought the gold from its hiding-place under the mud floor. Then, as he gazed down at his helpless enemy, he turned to Ruwaidhi:

"'The money was well earned,' he said. 'Give me thy dagger.' Thus was my price paid by the life of a man."

The woman paused again, then with a word of apology rose and refilled our glasses. For a moment she stood at the door of the hut, looking out over the marsh. I waited in silence, for I felt she had more to tell. What would be the sequel of this wild tale? She sat down again before the fire, a sad smile lighting up her thin face.

"A year we had," she went on. "One short year, before 'Ali bin Shabib made *dakhala.*

One year with him, and seventeen alone. May Allah give him peace!"

She turned to me. "Do the peoples across the sea make *dakhala?*"

I shook my head, smiling as I thought how embarrassed would be a peaceable Londoner if a fugitive from justice should rush up and clasp his feet, compelling him if he valued his honour to protect him who thus claimed asylum, even at the cost of his own life.

"He only did what his honour demanded," she went on, "but, oh Allah! how we women suffer!" She wrung her hands, then resumed in her former quiet tone of retrospect.

"For nearly a year we had been living on the edge of the Nasif marsh, but grazing for the buffaloes was getting short, and the tribe decided to move further into the marshes. We were loath to go, we two, for we had been happy in that house which was our first home together; and when the tribe carried we said that we would be the last to go. Ah, would that we had been the first! On the last day, when all the rest had gone, we waited alone for the *mashhuf* which in a few hours would be back to fetch us and our household things. I was spinning wool, looking out to the water where

Ruwaidhi in his *challabiya* was hunting fish. He hurled his spear—a flash of silver, and he was poling towards me with our midday meal. Then from behind me came a rushing of feet; a flying, hunted figure dashed across the mud, ran straight to Ruwaidhi as he leapt from the boat, and seized him by the feet. 'Save, save! I am thy suppliant!' he gasped. *'Wasalat*—go no further,' answered Ruwaidhi.

"A bullet whistled over my head. My husband ran to the hut and seized his rifle. 'Ali's pursuers, some six or seven in number, broke shouting through the reeds, and called on Ruwaidhi to give him up. 'Never!' he said. 'He has made *dakhala* to me, and while I live I shall defend him.' 'Ali had no weapon, and asked for none; truly he was a craven youth, or perhaps spent with his flight, for he lay still where he had fallen. But the strength and valour of Ruwaidhi, and his deadly aim with a rifle, were known throughout the marshes, and his assailants feared to come too near. My heart throbbed with pride as I watched him—one against seven. One fell as his rifle rang out, but I heard my baby wailing within, and ran to hide him in the reeds where he might be safe. Then I went back to my husband's side; he was wounded,

and the men were growing bolder. The bullets came fast—see, I was wounded here and here. A great sleepiness came over me, and I crawled closer that I might fall asleep near him. The noise of the fighting grew fainter.

"Suddenly I heard Ruwaidhi's voice speaking in my ear. 'Beloved,' he said, 'I have but six rounds unspent. Tell the stranger to take the *challabiya* and take to the marshes; he will find protection with my tribe.' Painfully and slowly I struggled to the young man; I gave him the message. Then darkness came over me. When I awoke, I found my husband lying cold in a pool of blood. The stranger and the *challabiya* had disappeared. I looked for my baby, but even he had not been spared."

She stopped, and it seemed to me that a strange chill was in the air.

"Ah, Effendim," she added, "the world calls me mad; but those who love little, grieve little."

Our quest of tea had taken longer than I had expected and we should have to hurry if we were to be back at the village before nightfall. The brothers, refreshed by their rest, paddled vigorously. As our frail craft slipped swiftly

through the narrow waterways, I asked whether the story we had just heard were true.

"Allah knows," said the laconic Bahalul; but Jahalul was more communicative. "I know this only," he said. "If a man sees a *jinn* in the form of a beautiful woman, and tries to make her his own, he will become possessed, and will begin to pine away, crying, 'She has gone from me, she has gone from me,' until he dies of grief. Perhaps it was a *jinn* whom this woman saw in the form of a comely young man, and desired him; thus she became bewitched, weeping and wailing every night, as all who pass may hear, for love of him whom she has lost. Who knows?"

The sun was setting in a cloud of flame, and everything was still. The tall feathery heads of the reeds had ceased their nodding; no whisperings in the rushes, no bird-voices from the reeds broke the silence. Then a puff of chill evening breeze rippled the water, and borne on it I seemed to hear, as if from very far away, the sound of a voice raised in lamentation.

We woke next morning to find that the south wind had fulfilled its threat. The sky was dull and overcast, and we had not long set out on

our day's journey before the heavens opened, and the rain poured down in torrents. Our blue and green world of yesterday was changed to one of dull, monotonous greys.

Bahalul and Jahalul, frankly admitting that there was no protection in their soaking garments, soon threw them off, and poled steadily on through the rain which ran in rivulets down their brown, naked bodies. The Haji and myself pretended to find some warmth in our sodden clothes, and sat in shivering discomfort as hour after hour we travelled through grey rain on grey water, shut in by grey walls of reeds, and overhung by an ever greyer sky. The knowledge that not far ahead of us lay another marsh settlement buoyed up our spirit; but when we reached the *ishan,* it was deserted. Only a few mud ovens, round and smoke-blackened, showed that not long ago it had been as busy a centre of life as the village we had left at dawn.

Leaning on their poles like two figures carved in bronze, Bahalul and Jahalul gazed down at the Haji as he silently debated our next move. He seemed to be at a loss, and at length "*Al jaziral*" suggested Bahalul.

The desert! It seemed very distant, very far

removed from this apparently limitless expanse of swamp. Distant indeed it was, but not beyond our reach, as Haji Rikkan agreed when he saw the force of Bahalul's suggestion; for once there, we were certain to find some hospitable tents where the edge of the desert is washed by the marsh waters.

I had made many long journeys with Bahalul and Jahalul, and never had I seen signs of fatigue in either. Now this long day of rain and gloom seemed to have taken the zest out of them. They bent to their poles wearily—and no wonder, for they had poled and paddled not only long but fast, in the effort to reach shelter before nightfall.

"My brothers, my brothers!" cried Haji Rikkan to encourage them, and with grunts they would renew their efforts, only to slacken gradually as fatigue once more overcame them.

As the day darkened towards evening the rain ceased. We left the reeds, and came out upon a stretch of water across which the Haji, rising to his feet, peered anxiously in an effort to take some bearings for our landfall. The low mist baffled even his unerring sense of direction.

"Ba'd shaibi," he called encouragingly to his weary nephews. "Nigh dear as my beard—

dear as my heart!" His exhortations became more frequent as we moved more and more slowly through the darkness. "Dear as my two kidneys!" he cried at last, and for the first time in that dreary day I laughed, and as we laughed the *birkash,* with a slight shiver, ran on to a bank of soft mud.

"To Him be praise!" ejaculated Haji Rikkan; then, "Silence," he ordered.

We all strained our ears, listening for some sound which would tell of the nearness of man. And we were rewarded, for out of the silence, from far away, came the bark of a dog.

"Wasalna—we have arrived," said Haji Rikkan with pride.

But an Arab is apt to use this comforting phrase when one's destination is barely in sight. We had yet to find in the darkness the tents from which that welcome bark had come. Leaving Bahalul and Jahalul in the boat, the Haji and I trudged through water and mud in the direction of the sound.

It seemed hours before we were challenged, and learned that we had reached the tents of Shaikh 'Arar. The watchman led us to the *madhif,* where we were hospitably welcomed by the shaikh's son, who did the honours without

the slightest sign of surprise at the arrival of two draggled and weary guests at nearly midnight. We were soaked to the skin: let more brushwood be thrown on the fire; we were hungry: even now they were bringing food to set before us—and the death-cry of a chicken outside bore witness to the wide divergence between truth and politeness.

We awoke next morning to a new world. Though the marsh was but a short distance away —far shorter than it had seemed the night before—we had left the marsh life behind. Round us now were camels, flocks, tethered horses, black hair tents. The only sign of fusion between desert and marsh was the use by some of the Bedouin of reed mats as walls for their tents.

Shaikh 'Arar, who had been asleep when we arrived, greeted me jovially. Why had I come like a thief in the night? If he had been given warning of my coming he would have killed sheep, and given me a welcome which would have shown his gratitude. Had I not once, he said, years ago, rendered a service to the Bani 'Isa, who were his uncles? Because of that his horses were my horses, his sons my slaves, his tribe my body-guard, and he himself ready to ride wheresoever I would in my service.

The suggestion of a ride was applauded by Haji Rikkan. He himself wished to spend a day or more in trading with the desert tribes whose tents were set up along the edge of the marsh; and as no shooting was to be had in the great open stretch of water before us, why should I not pay a visit to Shaikh Fahad?

Shaikh Fahad! That was a name which still held for me a hint of glamour, of romance. It had been on all men's lips at one time, the name of a great leader, whose tribesmen revered him because he openly strove and fought for that freedom which was their inarticulate ideal. I had never met this shaikh whose youthful defiance of the Turks had become legendary, who had seen in the British Occupation a still greater menace to Arab liberty, and had steadily refused submission, remaining unmoved in the desert to which he truly belonged while his lands were given to rivals, his flocks were confiscated, and the world moved on without him. Now that the opportunity of seeing him had come, I gladly took it.

Our way lay across a barren desert, once irrigated and thickly peopled. On all sides, looking enormous in the heat haze, rose irregular mounds, sites of ancient cities. The ground was

strewn in places with fragments of pottery, glazed and unglazed, and with burnt bricks, many of which were inscribed. A few of these, laboriously carried to Baghdad, roused but faint interest in the archæologist to whom they were shown, for they bore the names of Nebuchadnezzar and Ur-nam-mu, two prolific builders whose bricks are so common that they pave the courtyards of many houses in lower 'Iraq to-day.

Traces of the old irrigation system were easily discernible—straight canals with distributaries taking off at regular intervals, in marked contrast to the meandering, ill-designed channels dug by the Arab of to-day. These old canals are to be traced, not as might be expected by depressions, but by ridges, the remains of the ancient soil-banks. It may well have been the heart-breaking task of silt-clearing these canals which caused the children of Israel to sit down and weep. Perhaps, I thought, they hanged up their harps on the willows beside the very canal along which we were riding, now treeless and deserted; for we were well within the southern limits of Babylonia. I recalled the "Burden of Babylon": truly the "besom of destruction" foretold by Isaiah could not have swept more thoroughly.

It was nearly sunset when we dismounted at the tents of Shaikh Fahad, who rose and came to meet us as we entered his *madhif*. One side of the great hair tent was open to the evening breeze, and the roof had been raised with extra poles for greater coolness; the floor was bare earth, swept clean; across the two ends were laid narrow carpets of home weaving. In the middle of the floor, marked off by a low rounded ridge of earth, was the hearth, with its row of beaked, smoke-blackened coffee-pots standing in the embers. The coffee-man, his large brass pestle and mortar by his side, squatted beside it, from time to time using his long iron tongs to pile the embers round the coffee-pots. A few tribesmen sat in a silent row at one end of the long tent. Between us and the back of the *madhif,* where its great tassels hung black and sharp against the orange of the sunset sky, the shaikh's hawk moved restlessly on its low perch of carved wood, ornamented with bands of brass.

"Hawk-like," as I glanced from the bird to the man, seemed to me to be the best word to describe Shaikh Fahad. The hooked nose and jutting chin, the sunken eyes, the firmly-closed mouth above the short greying beard, must have made up a face of remarkable beauty in youth,

and one as full of character and power. But Fahad's great days were past, and with them the light had gone from his eyes; his face was expressionless, lifeless, the face of a man who, having lost everything, no longer cares that it is lost.

Refreshed by the strong, pungent coffee, and thankful for the rest and coolness after our long ride, we sat until the sunset had faded and only the glowing hearth lit up the shaikh's *madhif*. Conversation was desultory and fitful. At length the talk turned on Arab customs, and grew more animated; Shaikh Fahad seemed to rouse himself from the brooding silence which he had scarcely broken by a word since first greeting us.

"Than the customs of the Arabs none are better," he said. "But of what avail is it, when they are being daily corrupted?"

In the respectful silence which followed his words, only one voice had the temerity to ask, "How?"

"By the English," he replied curtly, turning to me.

"Listen," he went on in his deep and curiously vibrating voice. "This tale is true, as all here know, though to thee who art a stranger it

may not be known. A man of the Khaza'il tribe once had reason to fly from his own people, and coming to the Shammar country took up his abode and became neighbour to a certain Shammari, who in accordance with our custom thus became responsible for his welfare. One night the Khaza'ili, returning from a journey, saw his daughter hidden among the camels which were tethered between the two tents; and she was clasped in the arms of the Shammari's son, who kissed her. And the next morning the Khaza'ili left that place, his family and his beasts with him. Now the Shammari was grieved that his neighbour should thus have left him without a word, and the more he searched his mind the more certain he became that no action of his was the cause. Then, fearing that it might be the fault of his sons, he determined to question them.

"To the eldest he said, 'In the time of my youth, a woman as beautiful as the daughter of the Khaza'ili would not go unkissed.' To which his son replied, 'It were a shame upon me.'

"To the second he said the same, and received the same reply. But the third son, hoping to please his father, answered,

" 'I have kissed her, and she has slept upon my breast.'

"And his father answered, 'Good, my son.'

"That day the Shammari set out for the desert, taking with him his eldest and his youngest sons, and in his saddle-bag a skein of wool. When they had ridden a certain distance he called the youngest son—him who had caused the Khaza'ili to leave his protector—and cutting off his head wrapped it in the wool he had brought.

" 'Ride,' he said to his eldest son, 'Find the Khaza'ili, and give him this ball of wool.'

"The young man did as he was bidden, saying to the Khaza'ili,

" 'This gift is sent thee by my father.'

"And the Khaza'ili, unwinding the wool, saw the head of the youngest son. Then knew he that the Shammari had wiped out the insult to his house.

" 'Thy flag is white,' he said to the eldest son, and returned with him to his father's tents."

In the silence that followed his story the vibrant voice of the shaikh rang out with startling fervour: "The English would have hanged that Shammari!" [1]

"These days are not like the days of our fath-

[1] This is not so, for tribal cases are judged according to a special law, introduced during the British Occupation, which makes full allowance for the binding obligation on a tribesman to take life when his honour is at stake.

ers," Fahad continued, now evidently launched on his favourite theme. He spoke slowly, gazing at the fire without movement or gesture or play of feature; only his voice betrayed his earnestness.

"In my father's time Husain of the Bait 'Abdul Khan, of the Bani Lām, having killed a kinsman of the great Madhkur, fled with his daughter Hasila to Shaikh Mansur of the Muntafiq. Now Hasila was beautiful, and Mansur wished to take her in marriage; but because the Bani Lām consider themselves of nobler birth they would not give their daughters in marriage to the Muntafiq, nor do they to this day; yet could not Husain refuse when Mansur pressed, being under obligation to him. Accordingly he agreed to give the girl, asking but one day's delay in which to move his tents to a distance, that Shaikh Mansur might come riding to ask for her, as was befitting. Then during the night Husain and his daughter fled, crossed the Tigris at Kumait by the ferry that was there, and so came to the tents of Shaikh Madhkur. Entering the *madhif,* he tied his *chafiya* to the tent-pole; then drawing his sword cried, 'With this blade take my life, but first I entrust this girl to thy keeping!'

" 'Speak, explain,' said Madhkur.

" 'O Protected of Allah,' Husain replied, 'my daughter is desired in marriage by Shaikh Mansur. But she is a woman of the Bani Lām, and rather than let her wed a man of the Muntafiq it seemed to me better to be slain by thee.'

" 'Thou hast done well,' said the great Madhkur. 'As for the blood thou hast shed, let it be a sacrifice for thee, for from thee will I take no *fasl*—neither woman nor blood-money. Instead the land of Sabaibah shall be thy fief.'

"Not thus," concluded Fahad, "would the shaikhs of the Bani Lām act to-day."

Here I was on firmer ground. Of the Shammar and Khaza'ili tribes I knew little, but among the Bani Lām I had many friends; I had stayed in their tents, and all their great names were familiar to me. Thus I knew that Shaikh Fahad's indictment was not without foundation. A generation or so ago, the desert code of the Bani Lām had held unquestioned sway; the stern virtues illustrated by these stories—the pride, the generosity, the quixotic gallantry and the unsparing sacrifice—were revered and cherished. But of late years the tribe had tended to roam the desert less, its leaders had ceased to be shep-

herds of great flocks and had begun to settle down to cultivation of the land. Once bitten by the desire for wealth and ease, the shaikhs grew avaricious, and their cultivators were soon feeling the yoke of the oppressor. Corruption has indeed set in, but it cannot be laid at the door of Turks or English; it began to spread, an insidious poison, as soon as the Arabs abandoned the stern but simple code of the desert.

But are the Governments of 'Iraq, past and present, altogether free from blame? It is still the official policy to settle the nomad Arab on the land, and the invariable result is immorality and degeneration. It seems that the nomad cannot lose his wildness without losing his virtues also. The Bedouin, when they walk through the little towns at the desert's edge, to which they come each year to trade, stop their nostrils in scornful disgust at the stuffy, malodorous streets. May not their instinct show a greater wisdom than the wisdom of those who would tempt them from the desert?

Shaikh Fahad, bidding us a courtly good night, went to his own tent. An idealist, he had fought all his life for his ideals, and though beaten had not yet surrendered. He would al-

ways be a great figure; but the merciless desert folk had passed their harsh verdict upon him.

"His sword," they said, "has become a sword of lead; it glitters, but cuts not."

Chapter III

A PILGRIMAGE

HERE at last was a channel of clear water! All day, as we traversed the narrow by-ways of the marsh, our way had been impeded and our progress hindered by the clinging water-weeds. Wearying as they are to the boatman, these flowering masses have a beauty of their own. The goose-flower lies on the surface in a sheet of white blossom like that of the wild strawberry; *jat,* the favourite food of the buffalo and not despised by his master, has a gay pink flower; the dull red of the 'oxtongue' and the brighter red of the round-leaved *ga'aiba* give their note of colour to the marsh. None the less, we all rejoiced when at last the hampering masses were left behind, and we found ourselves in a channel the limpid water of which was evidently kept clear by the frequent passage of boats. A paddle stuck into the water to show where its owner had cast poison to catch fish, a net for snaring birds, were signs that my sur-

mise had not been unfounded; and soon the breeze bore faintly to our ears the distant shouts of men.

Nearer to us, in a channel running parallel to ours, but hidden from sight by the thick barrier of reeds, we could hear the rapid sing-song chatter of two women as they paddled their craft towards the village. The daughter of the despised Ma'dan has one great advantage over her social superiors; she goes unveiled, as free as any English girl to comb her hair and don her gayest dress when a chance meeting with her lover seems possible. As the social level rises, so does the seclusion of the Arab woman become stricter. The rich shaikh, for example, will build a reed fence or a wall of mud to give greater privacy to his women's quarters, while the shaikh of a desert tribe when moving camp will hang some brightly-coloured cloth on the leading camel, as a warning to strangers to keep their distance. The bigger the shaikh, the more rigid the seclusion of his women; but the strictest rules are those which govern the well-to-do families of the towns. There the woman must go heavily veiled; she may not see her future husband, nor he her; only in the bridal chamber do they discover whether their messengers had been

truthful, or whether, corrupted by gifts, they had extolled imaginary charms. Even the seemingly innocuous practice of exchanging photographs is condemned by the more conservative.

In the *mashhuf* which we could hear so close to our own, one of the unseen women began to sing.

> "O youth in flowing cloak
> New-dipped in henna fine,
> Death by my father's sword were better
> Than not be thine!"

As the last lingering note of her "thin melancholy music" died away, the second girl began in her turn to sing.

> "No ferry-man is here for me to pay,
> No power have I to swim.
> Like one who is poisoned, on this side I stay,
> Staggering for love of him."

"Huh, huh!" cried Jahalul aloud. Stirred by this crude appeal to passion he churned the water into foam with the powerful strokes of his paddle. "A thousand greetings! Sing again!" he shouted; but silence answered him.

In a few minutes we came upon a marshman cutting reeds with his sickle. He was naked, and the muscles rippled under his brown skin as he worked.

"Allah strengthen thee!" the Haji greeted him in passing.

"Allah guard thee!" replied the reed-cutter. Then he called after us, "Danger in thy way!"

"Ha?" queried the old peddler.

"W'Allah," the marshman affirmed. It seemed that a party of the Batabta, who were at feud with the Haji and his tribe, had preceded us on their way to the very village in which we had intended to spend the night.

For a moment Haji Rikkan hesitated. Then, "the Bait Sawad," he suggested.

"They have carried," was the curt reply. This was unwelcome news, but it was decided that we should none the less sleep on the *ishan* vacated by the Bait Sawad, for no other settlement was near, and the Haji wished at all costs to avoid an encounter with his enemies of the Batabta tribe.

It was dark when we reached the deserted island. Bahalul and Jahalul busied themselves with lighting a fire and trying their unpractised hands at cooking a meal, while the Haji and I talked of the feud which was the cause of our lonely sojourn. From the story of his own we passed to feuds in general, and their settlement by the tribal method of *fasl.*

"Female children," says Doughty somewhere, "are a burden of small joy in a poor Muslim family, for whom the father shall at last receive but a slender bride-money, when they are divided from his household." But even the bride-money can be little consolation to parents whose daughter's fate it is to be a *fasl*-woman.

Among the Arabs the primitive law of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life holds good. Every injury has its equivalent compensation, failure to pay which leads to a blood-feud, an inter-tribal war of extermination in which it is not a crime but a solemn duty to murder, in cold blood or open warfare, as many as possible of the enemy. The compensation for an injury, whether to a man's body or to his honour, varies widely among the tribes; in one, the *fasl* for killing a man's dog may be enough grain to cover the dead body held up by its tail, in another nothing less than the payment of a woman may be required. In all cases where human life has been taken, the *fasl* is paid in women—two, four, or six for each man's life, according to the custom of the tribe and according to the relationship of the murderer to his victim: if they are members of the same tribe,

the penalty is heavier than if no blood-relationship unites the two.

The only recognized method of ending a blood-feud is this same method of *fasl,* compensation being paid to the side which has lost the greater number of victims; the number by which its losses exceed those of the other side is counted up, and for each man's life two or more women are handed over.

The lot of a *fasl*-woman is a hard one. As soon as she reaches marriageable age—often as early as eleven or twelve—she is torn from her parents and handed over, according to the terms of a *fasl* arranged, perhaps, many years previously, to a tribe hostile to her own and therefore often hostile to herself. If she does not bear a son to her new tribe, she may be handed back in ignominy, another woman being demanded in her stead; in some tribes if she gives birth to a son she may leave him behind, and returning to her own people marry the man of her choice, provided that the full bride-money is paid to her former husband.

The *fasl*-woman becomes the absolute chattel of the stranger to whom she is allotted. However bad her treatment—and it is not likely to be over-good—she cannot demand a divorce.

Still, she is one degree better off than a slave-woman, whom her owner may kill if he so desires: the man who kills his *fasl*-woman has to pay women to her tribe, for, the Arabs argue, she is given in blood only, and is not his in blood and bone, as is the slave-woman.

It is inevitable that the *fasl*-woman should suffer cruelly in thus expiating the sins of her tribe. To western minds it seems intolerable that the custom of a money payment instead of payment of a woman, sometimes adopted among the tribes, should not be generally enforced. But the Arabs have learned by long experience that the old method of handing over women is by far the most effective for ensuring future amity between the tribes hitherto at feud. More surely than the payment of money, this intermarriage brings about a lasting and real reconciliation.

To his women-folk, who have thus become the common currency for the settling of disputes, the Arab is at once exacting and merciless. Handed over like cattle as compensation for the sins of men, the woman must herself conform to the highest standard of virtue, one far higher than that required of her husband; from this standard if she fall by ever so little, the

penalty is death. The merest suspicion, the slightest breath of scandal is enough; if her reputation is barely called in question, it becomes the duty of her nearest male relation to take her life. Unless the husband is her cousin, no dishonour attaches to him, for he is not of her blood; he will merely drive her from his home, leaving her father or brother to take what action he must. Sometimes the woman meets a merciful end; but it is not unusual for her to be enveigled to some lonely spot, there abused and reviled for her conduct, and stabbed with a dagger or even beaten to death with a spade. Often the avenger will cut off her right hand, as a visible proof that his honour is clean and that no reproach can now be levelled at him. It is on such occasions that all the latent savagery of the Arab, that strain of brutality which earned for him so bad a name with the British Expeditionary Force, comes to the surface.

Even if the man would be merciful, public opinion expressed by word or gesture drives him to take action. The duty of punishing immorality is one against which no natural affection, no family sentiment, may contend. Between the twin brothers who so often paddled me about the marshes a strong tie of fraternal

affection was evident, silent and undemonstrative though it might be; an equal tie probably existed between them and the sister whom I had seen some years earlier. Yet, so the Haji told me as we sat together on this lonely *ishan,* Bahalul had killed her with his own hand at a taunt from an angry neighbour.

He had returned to his hut one day to find his little brother in tears; the child had been beaten, he said, by one Guhait, to whose hut Bahalul went straightway in anger. "Words passed between them, grew fierce and high. Then said Guhait, 'Is it so great a crime to beat a foolish boy? Why such heated words over the sore back of a child, when thou thyself dost allow thy sister to break the honour of our tribe with Radhi?' So Bahalul left him with no more speech, and returning to his mother's house found Furaiha sitting within. 'Sister,' he said, 'the price of adultery is death,' and he stabbed her twice."

I was appalled at this savage act, and especially that Bahalul should have acted on a mere taunt, which might have been baseless.

"No," the Haji replied. "Not baseless, for Guhait would not have dared. If it were so, by our law he would be the cause of her death, and

would have had to pay five women as *fasl*. No, Bahalul did well, as all men agreed. We know only our own law and that of our fathers for many generations: every man is bidden to preserve the honour of his tribe, and Bahalul did but that."

Haji Rikkan's defence was barely ended, when Bahalul came towards us with the tea he had just made. Feeling that the subject could not but be an unhappy one to him, I hastened to speak of something else.

"Tell me, O Haji," I said at random, "of thy pilgrimage to Mecca."

"Mecca, Mecca the Honourable, the place of the Cha'aba, truly a distant city," mused the Haji, as with a piece of reed he stirred the glass of tea handed him by his nephew.

"Ma sh'Allah!" he cried after a pause, drawing himself up, and tossing back the ends of the checked *kafiya* on his head, "What a journey! What courage!"

"Eh wah!" assented Bahalul.

"As Allah liveth, a bold journey!" resumed the Haji. "Aye, by the son of Abu Talib, others would have been afraid. None other would have left the shelter and safety of the marsh,

save only to trade in the villages beside the river. But as for me——"

"Aye," put in Jahalul sympathetically. "Well might they be afraid, knowing that but few who left the marsh in those days ever returned. They remembered 'Ubaid bin Bakr."

"True, my son, true!" broke in the Haji, who if a story was to be told liked to tell it himself. "May the All-powerful give him peace! The tale is a short one. 'Ubaid bin Bakr was a hunter of fish, which he was used to barter for dates and tobacco with Musa al Khanayab, a peddler like myself. Now it chanced one day that he had speech with a Sabaean, a smith, who went from village to village repairing such *mashhufs* as had need of his skill; and the Sabaean laughed at his handful of dates and tobacco, telling him of the high price which such fish as his would fetch in the market at 'Amara. So 'Ubaid, filled with the hope of great gain, determined to take his next boat-load to 'Amara; and he and his cousins fished by night and by day, until their *mashhuf* was full. Then he left the marshes for the distant town. But neither he nor his *mashhuf* was ever seen again—no, nor the fish that he had with him."

"Nor, O my uncle, is my father's sister forgotten," began Jahalul.

"He speaks of Khadifa," interrupted Haji Rikkan, turning to me.

At this point Bahalul brought the dish of rice and the bread he had baked, and we sat down in a circle to our frugal meal. When we had eaten and washed our hands, "What of Khadifa?" I asked.

"She lived among us for many years, a barren woman," began the Haji. "And when at last she bore a child, it was a girl. So her grief was great, that the fruit of her old age should be no cause of pride; but at length she ceased to weep, comforted by the thought that in time her daughter would become the mother of sons. Now it chanced that one of our tribe quarrelled with one of the Bani Harb, and drawing his dagger killed the man; then *fasl* was made between our tribe and theirs, and the *fasl* was that we should hand over three women to them. Of these three one was the daughter of Khadifa; and the Bani Harb was a camel-breeding tribe, living far from our marshes in the desert. None could console Khadifa for her daughter's departing, for with the maiden she lost the sons she had hoped to have through her. Weeping

and mourning she passed her days, lamenting that never now would she see her daughter's children.

"In time a passing stranger brought word to our village that Khadifa's daughter had given birth to a son. Joy strove with sorrow in her heart—joy for her daughter's motherhood, sorrow that never might she set eyes upon the child. One day she heard that that same stranger was returning on his way to his home, but three days distant from the tents of the Bani Harb; and it seemed to her that the desire of her heart might at last be granted. And Allah seemed to be gracious, for when she begged the stranger to take her with him in his *mashhuf,* her entreaties prevailed. Taking from its hiding-place the small store of money which she had gathered together, she bought a necklet of silver set with turquoise: this was her gift for him whom she called her new-born son. She wrapped it in her garments, and set out in Hasan's *mashhuf* with the confidence of one who knows naught.

"At the river's bank, near to the desert where dwelt the Bani Harb, Hasan left her. He gave her dates and a small skin of water, and saying 'May Allah strengthen thee' watched her set out alone towards the distant tents which shel-

tered her daughter. From that hour," concluded Haji Rikkan solemnly, "no man set eyes upon Khadifa, nor was word of her ever heard."

The hot day had turned into a drenching night; the dew was so heavy that our clothes were soaked as if with rain. For my greater comfort—or so I thought—Haji Rikkan sent off his nephews to collect fuel, that we might dry our wet garments. When they had gone he moved closer to me, and leaning forward began to speak in low tones.

"Because of our friendship, nothing is hidden between us. I have sent the young men away, for I wish them not to hear the tale I shall tell thee; to thee only will I tell all."

He paused impressively, giving me time to realize the strict confidence with which I was honoured.

"It was through the madness of my sister's husband that I became a haji," he went on, "and this was the way of it. My sister—not the mother of these lads, yet daughter of the same father as myself—was wedded to one Talib, son of 'Abdul Wahhab. Now this 'Abdul Wahhab, though he married four wives, was childless for many years, so that his reproach was great among the people. And when he took at last a fifth

wife, they mocked him. But Allah was gracious, and the fifth wife brought him a son. Then, as soon as the child was born, 'Abdul Wahhab lifted him high above his head, saying, 'Thanks be to Allah, who at last has blessed me with a son! Now I swear that this Talib my son shall visit the great 'Abbas [1]; with his necklet and earrings he shall pay honour to the tomb of the Avenger.'

"But it happened that while the child was yet at his mother's breast, 'Abdul Wahhab died. So the boy grew up and became a man, and himself took a wife and begat children, and still his father's vow was unfulfilled. But such an oath as that is not lightly neglected; and one night my sister was roughly awakened from her sleep.

"'Mutaira, Mutaira!' cried Talib, 'I have dreamed a fearful dream. 'Abbas is angered against me, wrathful because I have failed to visit him, because I have not fulfilled my father's sacred vow.' And kissing my sister from her forehead to her feet, he swore a solemn oath that he would not shave his head until he had been to the shrine.

[1] 'Abbas, son of *'Ali bin Abi Talib*, the Prophet's son-in-law and nephew.

"But in the morning my sister, watching him, saw that often he could not bring his lips to say the words he wished to utter. And when he saw any man coming towards him, he would run weeping and kiss him, crying, 'Ah, 'Abbas, son of 'Ali the beloved, I am come to fulfil my vow.' Still he did harm to no man, but would wander off alone into the marsh, until one day a stranger struck him when he tried to embrace and greet him; and from that time the madness of Talib increased, making him fierce and wild and apt to strike other men in sudden anger. All feared him.

"So at last Mutaira went to each of her kinsmen, saying, 'May Allah preserve thee, may He reward thee! Accompany me, I pray, to the tomb of the Avenger, the Adjutant of Allah, the Giver of Water to the Thirsty, that 'Abbas may restore my husband. As for money, I will sell my bed and my ornaments, all that I have shall be thine; only one golden lira will I keep, that Talib may throw it to the Father of the Hot Head at the tomb. Then surely 'Abbas will no longer be angry, but will let my husband return with us at peace.'

"But they refused every one, putting her off with excuses: for they were marshmen, and

feared to leave the shelter of the reeds to undertake so long and hazardous a journey. And I was no better than the rest; for when she came to me, begging me with tears to go with her, I replied, 'Dear as my eyes, how can I leave my home? Thou knowest as well as I that my wife is big with child.' And I spoke not without reason, for she was my first wife, and my heart was still warm to her."

The Haji threw away his cigarette, and gazed meditatively into the moonlit night.

"Strange, strange how the memory of a first wife will linger in a man's mind!" he said. "I have known men call on their death-beds upon the name of their first wife, though she were dead, or long ago divorced. As for me—may He forgive!—to those who have no compassion none shall be shown. I had none for Mutaira, and truly my punishment came quickly, *eh b'Illah!*

"In due time my wife left me and went to her mother's house, for it was her first child. And when I heard her calling upon 'Ali—the Lord of the Faithful is ever good to women in travail—I knew that her time had come, and I listened to hear what I should hear. But though I waited long, there came no cries of

joy from the grandmothers around her; thus knew I that a girl had been born to me. But as the day drew to a close I heard lamentation and a beating of breasts, and when messengers came to me I refused to listen to their words, for I knew what they would say.

"And when my wife and her child were buried, the marsh seemed to me a place of lonely solitude and gloom, and I found no comfort in my kith and kin. So going to my sister I said, 'Mutaira, I will go with thee to the tomb of 'Abbas, and will keep thy husband in my care; and may the Father of the Hot Head be gracious.' "

Haji Rikkan's wrinkled face changed as suddenly as a child's. His look of reminiscent sadness disappeared, as he continued the tale of his journey, that first venture outside the marshes, which had so impressed itself upon his mind that every detail, every halt and wayside encounter, were after twenty years reproduced for my benefit with what was evidently the utmost fidelity. In his hands the simple recital became a tale of high adventure, enlivened everywhere by the shrewd mother-wit which modified and balanced the credulity of this son of the marsh.

All went well on the journey to Karbala. Brother and sister succeeded in so humouring the poor mad Talib that no difficulties were met with on their way out of the marshes and up the river. As they drew near their journey's end the number of pilgrims on the road grew daily larger, and from time to time they were overtaken by a horse or mule bearing a corpse for burial near the Place of Martyrdom. At last they sighted the twin golden minarets of the shrine, which seem to hold out so fair a promise of welcome and rest to the weary pilgrims from the surrounding desert. But in the Holy City, once reached, Haji Rikkan found swift disillusionment.

He was horrified at the rapacity of the Khan-keeper; the price charged for the small corner of the hostelry in which he and his two charges were huddled seemed to him enough to hire the whole khan. And when he went into the market to buy food, the prices were fantastic even if the seller had been prepared for an hour or two of friendly bargaining; nothing but sheer hunger drove the Haji at length to close with such preposterous charges. This, then, was the sacred city into which hundreds of pious and defenceless pilgrims poured daily!

A city of thieves and sharks, thought Haji Rikkan.

But more enlightenment was in store. The Saiyids and *mumins,* the professional men of religion, were themselves, it appeared, the worst offenders. Suave, persuasive, rapacious, their cajoleries were not to be denied. "Where is Allah's fifth?" they asked, "Where the share of the Imam?" "Dost pay nothing for *radd al madhalim* (indulgences)?" The servants of the Shrine, when he entered to kiss the holy tomb, were no better. "Give," said one, "for the purse of 'Abbas"; "Give," said another, seizing him by the shoulder, "that thou mayst be recompensed seventy-fold"; and yet another, pulling him by his cloak, demanded money "for his forbear's (the Prophet's) purse."

"They rested not," said Haji Rikkan bitterly, "until they had obtained their desire, which was my all." Penniless and resentful, he bade his sister lose no time in visiting the tomb of the Avenger, that they might return with all speed to the familiar safety of the marsh.

"We returned," the Haji continued, "and great was the rejoicing which greeted us, for none had thought to see us alive again. My tribe made *hosa,* firing their rifles in the air.

And in jest, because I had been to distant Karbala, one of my uncles called me Haji, which nickname clung to me although, long absent as I had been, never had I set foot in distant Mecca. Thus in later years, when I began to have dealings outside the marsh, it became clear to me that this title brought me respect and greater consideration wherever I might be; so with boldness I called myself Haji. The old men soon forgot, the young men never knew, that my journey had been not to Mecca but to Karbala; *w'Allah,* even I myself at times am verily persuaded that I have indeed made the Pilgrimage!"

Haji Rikkan's eyes twinkled, but he quickly resumed his air of dignity.

"All men now hail me a Haji," he said. "Yet because nothing is hid between us, because of the friendship that is ours, I tell thee the truth."

He looked at me with some apprehension, wondering how I should take this confession of a life-long deception.

"What, O Haji," I said, "of Talib? Did 'Abbas relent, and cure him of his madness?"

"*B'Illah 'alaik,* what question is this?" he exclaimed; but I could see that he was pleased that I still called him by the familiar title.

"Nay, have I not told thee that the servants of the Tomb took from us our all? How then should 'Abbas himself, the Father of the Hot Head, the Swift to Avenge, be satisfied with but a single lira? Nay, Talib returned as mad as he had gone, and in that state remained to the day of his death: may Allah show him mercy!"

Chapter IV

THE SHRINE OF 'ALI AL SHARJI

WHY, I wondered idly, had Haji Rikkan asked me to disembark at the little town of Kumait, some fifty or sixty miles north of the marshes which were his usual beat? I should soon know, for the steamer on which I had come from Baghdad was bearing full-speed downstream on the top of a spring flood, and the clump of willows and solitary date-palm which mark Kumait were already in sight.

The flood was an unusually high one. More than once on our way down the river I had seen the cultivators working feverishly at the earthen bunds which kept the rushing water off their lands. Here the general slope of the land was away from the river; a single breach, one weak spot unstrengthened, and many miles of land might be submerged, hundreds of acres of crops destroyed. Even now, as we neared Kumait, we heard shouts from a group of tribesmen who were digging furiously with their long-handled

spades, and a woman ran along the bank holding out imploring hands. It was evident that they dreaded the effect of the vessel's wash on their laboriously built bund; but their cries were of no avail. The ship, with its heavy steel barges lashed on each side, swept on its way, the great wave licked along the bund, and at the weak spot poured over; but whether the damage was irreparable or not I never knew, for the little band of cultivators, striving so desperately to save their land from the hungry river, was soon out of sight.

We reached Kumait, and swinging round in a wide curve the boat banked in. I threaded my way among the high piles of sheep-skins on the barge, and walked down the swaying plank. A sonorous "Peace and kinship and welcome!" greeted my landing, and Haji Rikkan welcomed me with a hearty kiss on both cheeks. Were we not old friends, and had he not once saved my life?

He hurried me through the small crowd which had watched the arrival of the steamer, and led me to the *chaiya* which he had in waiting. In this frail craft we embarked on the broad swirling bosom of the Tigris, and as we made our slow way upstream I learned why the

Haji had fixed on Kumait as our meeting-place. Once or twice a year he visited some tribes living round the marsh which, situated in the middle of the Bani Lām desert, is fed by the waters of the Duwairij and Tyb rivers from the Persian hills. The shrine of 'Ali al Sharji was so little out of his way that it was his custom on each visit to combine religious with professional duty, and make a pilgrimage to the tomb; he had arranged accordingly to meet me at the nearest place at which the steamer stopped. I was to spend the night with my old friend Shaikh Nasir, towards whose encampment we were now sailing, and in whose tents he proposed to leave me during the following day while he paid his visit to the Tomb.

The blue dome, rising from its group of willows, could now be seen, a welcome sight to the traveller whose eyes are weary of the dull brown banks between which the river winds for so many featureless miles. The willows are fine old veterans, thick-trunked, with widely-spreading branches. Beneath their shade sit the pilgrims, a strange picturesque assembly, gathered together from who knows where at the call of a common faith. As we passed we could see them sitting in little groups; four or five families,

perhaps, had travelled together, and babies, chickens, cooking-pots, here and there a sheep or two, were all dumped indiscriminately on the patch of ground which they had chosen for their camp. The men sat in a little company apart, smoking in silence, while the women prepared the evening meal. Each family had its own fire of camel-thorn, and in the light of the leaping flames the bright reds and greens of the women's garments showed in vivid contrast to the sombre black *shailas* on their heads. The children's brown bodies shone roundly in the firelight, and their shrill voices echoed on the quiet air. By the river bank were moored the *mashhufs* in which the pilgrims had travelled, their graceful lines silhouetted, black and sharp, against a background of curling blue smoke and ruddy firelight.

But the tomb of 'Ali is not merely a pleasant resort for pilgrims; it has another aspect. Arabs are inveterate liars. They are ready to swear falsely the most solemn oaths—by their honour, by their Prophet, by their God. But there are certain holy shrines which the superstition or faith of generations has credited with such powers that no Arab will swear a false oath by them; of these the tomb of 'Ali al Sharji is one.

In spite of the unbounded reverence in which his tomb is held, this 'Ali does not seem to have been a very important figure historically, and it is not easy to find out anything about his life. A number of rather uninteresting miracles are attributed to him, but his fame consists chiefly in reflected glory from the great names of his brother, 'Ali al Ridha, whose shrine in Persia is a well-known place of pilgrimage, and his father, who gives his name to the famous mosque and suburb of Baghdad, Kadhimain.

As our slow craft drew away from the Tomb, the boatman made a remark which I did not catch. From the heated tone of Haji Rikkan's reply I gathered that some doubt had been cast on the power of the holy man, dead these many hundreds of years, to slay those who perjured themselves at his tomb.

Leaving the Sunni[1] boatman to his own impious thoughts, Haji Rikkan moved nearer to me, and with more than his usual earnestness defended the saint whose tomb he would reverently kiss on the morrow, seeing no incongruity in the crude prints and mildewed mirrors and broken clocks which adorn its walls. To his

[1] The two great sects of Islam—*Shiah* and *Sunni*—are divided by no less bitter a hostility than were Roman Catholics and Protestants in 17th century Europe.

simple faith the power of 'Ali al Sharji to strike the false swearer with instant death was indubitable; it was a fact well-known, so widely accepted that no tribesman, whatever he had at stake, would perjure himself at the shrine. A story of which he could vouch for the truth, the Haji said earnestly, would show how great was 'Ali's reputation as one swift to punish perjury. He himself had seen a robber brought to book and his theft recovered by no other agency than the mere name of 'Ali. The story—so anxious was Haji Rikkan to omit no detail which might lend weight to his defence of the saint—became a long one, too long to be retold in his own words.

On one of his periodical visits to the little town at which he disposed of his surplus rice, Haji Rikkan became the guest for the night of a brother (and a more authentic) Haji—Sa'd, headman of a neighbouring village. Early in the morning his sleep was broken by the sound of angry voices; accusations of theft and indignant denials ended in an acrimonious wrangle, of which Haji Rikkan soon learned the cause. Some days earlier a townsman of Basrah, Ja'far by name, had come to Haji Sa'd's village to buy buffaloes. Each night he had slept with his four hundred gold liras under his pillow, and now

he had waked to find in place of the bag of gold a clod of earth.

Unable to obtain satisfaction from the headman, Ja'far had left the village threatening to lodge a complaint against him with the governor of the district; and the threat was not an empty one, for a few days later Haji Sa'd was arrested and brought in to headquarters, where he was informed by the Qaimmaqam that, as he was responsible for what occurred in his village, he must refund to the Basrawi the money stolen from him.

Haji Sa'd protested vigorously against this award.

"Is this justice?" he cried. "I am a true servant of the government, every order given by it is upon my head; but how can I, a poor man, pay so large a sum? Disgrace enough has come upon me by the robbing of my guest, as thine Honour knoweth. Had this Ja'far but entrusted his wealth to me, as our custom is, all would have been well; yet because he failed to do this, I must be ruined. O Excellency the Qaimmaqam, dost give credence to every story brought by lying tongues? Doubtless this townsman gambled away the money in the coffee-shops, and spread his tale of robbery to save

himself from the master who entrusted it to him."

Haji Sa'd's words were not without effect. He was allowed to return to his village pending the result of an official search for the thief. The headman, anxious to give what help he could, sent out some of his tribesmen to pick up the gossip of the country-side; but all they were able to elicit was the fact that a certain Daghar, a man of doubtful reputation of the Matafar tribe, had been seen near the village on the day before the theft. Even this man was said by some witnesses to have since died, and by some to have crossed into Persia, while according to others he had never been born.

No clue having been found by the police, this was all the Qaimmaqam had to go upon; but he resolved to make the most of it by applying a test of which long experience in the district had shown him the efficacy. He called in the headmen of the Matafar, and in the presence of Haji Sa'd and his witnesses, among whom was Haji Rikkan, delivered his ultimatum.

"One Daghar son of Makki, of your tribe," he said, "has stolen four hundred liras from the village of Haji Sa'd."

"W'Allah wa b'Illah wa t'Illah, I know

naught of it," swore one, and the other, "A curse upon me if I am even acquainted with this Daghar!"

"Listen," said the Qaimmaqam, "Either you will swear at the tomb of 'Ali al Sharji that what you say is true, or one of you must remain in prison until the thief and the money are brought."

Silence followed his words. At last, with downcast looks, one of the headmen spoke.

"We cannot swear. We are afraid."

"Stay in prison, thou," answered the Qaimmaqam, "while this other returns to bring the money."

"Let me stay in his stead," the second headman put in.

"Why?"

"Because Daghar is my cousin, and on my behalf will more readily return the money."

It was a definite admission. "And indeed," concluded Haji Rikkan, raising his voice that the doubting boatman might hear, "who but our 'Ali could have composed the matter thus? The government had sought the thief in vain; the Qaimmaqam was in despair; yet by the name of 'Ali al Sharji his gold was restored to the Basrawi who had thought never to see it again."

"Am I ignorant, I who live at Kumait in sight of 'Ali's tomb?" cried the boatman, ruffled at the Haji's tone. "For every tale of his deeds known to Haji Rikkan," he continued, turning to me, "I know a score, and with thy leave I will tell thee one. It is a true story, the tale of the Bald-headed One, of Sikar and Shaikh 'Abdul Hadi. Dost know it, Haji? No? Well do I remember that night, for Sikar slept in my uncle's house, and when the doctor came to dig up the body I went with him to the grave ——" the boatman plunged into a wealth of corroborative detail.

The sleeping village of Razifa had been awakened by a woman's scream. "Beware of the Bald-headed One, guard thyself from him of the bald head," cried the voice, and was abruptly silenced. The men of the village, hastening into the now silent hut, found its owner dead, and his wife dying. Her back was covered with dagger thrusts, as though she had flung herself down in an attempt to protect her husband. The Police Inspector, Saiyid Mohammad Effendi, was soon on his way, but before he reached Razifa the woman was dead, and the evidence of the only witness of the crime was lost.

Saiyid Mohammad, having examined the hut

in which Mirhun and his wife had been killed, sat in the shaikh's guest-house, asking question after question. His effort to trace a motive for the crime seemed rewarded when, after hours of cross-examination, he discovered that ten years previously, at the time of his marriage, Mirhun had quarrelled with one Sikar, a tribesman living a few miles away; for him the Police Inspector sent forthwith.

I suggested to the boatman that so long-ago a quarrel seemed small evidence on which to base a suspicion of murder; but he disagreed.

"Among the Arabs an injury is never forgotten," he said. "Though a man let pass twenty years before he slays, the tribes will say that he is hasty in his vengeance!"

It was sunset when Sikar was brought in, and the Police Inspector at once broke off his patient questioning of an old woman who brought a vague tale of a *mashhuf* poled by three men which she had seen leaving the village at midnight. The woman was hustled away, and after a few brief questions to Sikar the Police Inspector strode quickly across the floor and snatched the *kafiya* from his head. He was as bald as an egg.

This was conclusive enough for Saiyid Mo-

hammad, and Sikar was taken under arrest to 'Amara; but the next day, somewhat crest-fallen, the Inspector was back again. Sikar could prove a fairly convincing alibi, and had shown that the cause of his dispute with Mirhun was not such as would account for the crime.

The old woman's tale, overlooked in the stir of Sikar's arrival at Razifa, now engaged the Inspector's attention. The *mashhuf* had also been seen in a village a few miles downstream, and at daylight it had passed another, where the three boatmen had been recognized as men of the Ruhaiyil tribe. Here the trail was lost, but a distant cast in the Ruhaiyil territory again picked it up. Stage by stage it was followed to the head of the Difla canal, where it definitely vanished; but the clue, though incomplete, was not without significance. At the tails of the Difla canal lived Shaikh 'Abdul Hadi, whose nickname among the tribes was *Abu Gara'a*—"He of the Bald Head."

Though investigations continued, no new facts came to light. The evidence before the Mutasarrif was of the slightest. The murdered woman had cried, "Beware of the Bald-headed One!"; a bald-headed tribesman in a neighbouring village was known to have had a small

quarrel with Mirhun; and the mysterious *mash-huf* had been manned by three tribesmen of a shaikh known as "the Bald-headed." As his only chance of solving the problem, the Muta-sarrif ordered both Sikar and the shaikh to swear to their innocence on the tomb of 'Ali al Sharji. Sikar, as the one of lesser birth, was to be the first to take the oath; if he affirmed his innocence, Shaikh 'Abdul Hadi would be required to swear on the following day.

"With the kinsmen of Mirhun and with the keeper of the Shrine," went on the boatman, "Sikar entered the shrine. Placing his hand upon the lattice-work round the Tomb, he said aloud three times,

"By the truth of this 'Ali al Sharji al Kadhim, I killed not Mirhun."

"He left the Shrine, and as he went we watched him. He did not throw off his clothes like one mad, nor did he crawl on the ground and bite the earth, nor did he bark like a dog. He returned to Kumait and went to my uncle's house. There he supped and slept—and in the night he died."

"*Allahu Akbar*—Most great is Allah!" exclaimed Haji Rikkan in triumph. "Was not the truth in my hand when I told thee that 'Ali

al Sharji struck dead all who forswore themselves at his tomb?"

There was a grim light in the boatman's eye, but Haji Rikkan rushed on unheeding.

"For all its effendis the government could not find the murderer, yet our 'Ali knew that it was Sikar, and slew him when he swore falsely!"

"Why dost thou speak?" interrupted the boatman. "Thou hast a tongue, but so have others. May I not finish my story? Thou art like a *majarsha,* never silent. 'Ali al Sharji had erred, he had killed the innocent!"

Haji Rikkan drew his *'aba* more tightly round him, and put his hand to his beard. The story had taken a turn little to his liking. He sat in offended silence while the boatman ended.

"Because Sikar died, all men held him guilty of the murder, and Shaikh 'Abdul Hadi —since now there was no need for him to swear to his innocence—returned to his place. But after some days, the doctor from 'Amara came to Kumait. 'Where,' he asked, 'is this Sikar buried?' One showed him the way; many followed him, and I among them.

"The doctor ordered the earth to be dug away and the body taken from the grave: may he be forgiven, for it was a sin. They unwound the

reed mat in which Mirhun was wrapped, and the winding sheet also. Then,—O Merciful!—the doctor cut open the dead body.

"After he had left us, we heard nothing for many days. Then strange tidings reached our ears. Sikar's body was full of poison; the poison had been brought from Baghdad, one of the slaves of Shaikh 'Abdul Hadi was known to have been sent thither. In the end we heard that the Mutasarrif had ordered the presence of the shaikh; but he, fearful now that his guilt was known, fled to Huwaiza. As for what the Haji has told thee ——"

"*Wachi, wachi*—bank in!" shouted Haji Rikkan. While we talked the sun had set and the short twilight faded. On the bank ahead a moving light spoke of tents. Our hail was answered, and the lantern was waved to and fro to show us where to land. Across a stretch of rough, hummocky ground we followed the shadowy figure with the welcoming light, stumbling at length over tent-ropes as we neared a small group of tribesmen.

In the midst of the group stood the broad, upright figure of Shaikh Nasir, our host for the night. The light of the lanterns, thrown upwards, caught the gold thread which patterned

his rich blue silk robe, and decorated the neck of his voluminous cream-coloured *'aba.* It shone ruddily on his heavily-embroidered scarlet coat, and on the rings set with turquoise which adorned his powerful fingers.

As he led the way to his *madhif,* I wondered whether the next generation of shaikhs would be as virile and as dignified, as truly tribal leaders, as this representative of a passing order. Nasir —and many others were like him—did not hold his shaikhship merely by virtue of being his father's son. By courage and force of character he had earned the goodwill which had put him in that position, and by the same qualities had maintained it for two score years. Leader in battle, as his scarred and rugged face showed; spokesman in the councils of the tribe; deep schemer and intriguer when cunning served him;—his sons would certainly be more civilized, better educated; but would they have his force of character and leadership? Only time would show.

The floor of Shaikh Nasir's *madhif* was richly spread with Persian and Arab carpets; at the far end lay silk-covered mattresses piled with bolsters of brightly-coloured velvet. On one of these I was bidden to seat myself, while the

shaikh, as a special mark of attention from host to guest, lit a cigarette for me in his own mouth, and himself stirred my glass of tea.

For some time the silence was unbroken after the greetings of formality had been exchanged. The shaikh left the tent, and I moved nearer for a talk with his mullah or clerk, a member of a class of Arab society whose power is certainly doomed to wane in the next generation.

At present the mullah is indispensable to his master, for only in rare cases can the shaikh conduct his own correspondence. With paper spread on the palm of one hand, and reed pen held in the other, the mullah will write at his master's dictation, signing the letter with the impress of a ring taken from the shaikh's finger. In the past, when inter-tribal warfare was rather the rule than the exception, a man might be a powerful shaikh one day and a fugitive the next. He had no spare time for the education of his sons in any arts save those of war; and the young Arabs of shaikhly birth grew up, from the time they were able to sit a horse, trained to wield the sword rather than the pen. The mullah therefore, in his capacity of secretary and confidant to the shaikh, often possesses considerable power, and is sometimes

with good reason more feared among the tribesmen than the shaikh himself.

As I discussed with the mullah the always urgent question of the crops, all the Arabs in the *madhif* rose respectfully at the entrance of a tall old man. Clad in a coarse and worn woolen *'aba,* with a frayed leather belt round his broad waist, and rough sandals on his feet, he looked a typical cultivator; and not until he came close did I recognize him as my host, Shaikh Nasir himself.

He came to apologize for so abruptly leaving a guest. My slave his son, he said, would fulfil my every wish, but his own presence was urgently needed some miles downstream, where a serious breach had occurred in the bund.

"What would ye?" he ended, a note of pride in his voice. "Am I not the Father of Bunds?" and he took his leave.

"Is he indeed called the Father of Bunds?" I asked, turning to the mullah.

"Aye, that name has been his since first he became shaikh, while yet a boy. But some there be who call him *Abu Mayitain*—the Father of Two Dead Men."

"A strange title! How came he by it?"

"That will I tell to thine Honour," said the

mullah, tucking up his feet under him with a sigh of pleasurable anticipation. In the black hair tents of the desert, where narrative by word of mouth has still to serve for novel, drama, and newspaper, the post of story-teller is an honourable one; and the mullah with his rich, rolling voice was well fitted to make the most of an heroic tale.

"In the year after the death of Ghadhban in the fight against Kharaibat," he began, "my sister's husband desired to lease the lands of Khazaina from Shaikh Nasir. Now this is a good rich land, and free from salt; but well-nigh every year the river overflows its banks, and breaks through the bunds, flooding the greater part. For this reason the land was leased out for only a quarter its value, and 'Abdullah, the husband of my sister, offered two hundred liras to the shaikh. But Nasir was in need of money; for the last two years the crops had been poor, he owed much revenue, and the Turks were pressing for payment. He would not lease the land for less than six hundred liras.

" 'Were I but sure that my crops would be safe from flood,' said 'Abdullah, 'willingly would I pay this sum, for the land is good land.

But thou knowest that not more than one year out of five is the harvest safe.'

"'This,' said Nasir, 'shall be the fifth year.'

"'Dost know of the rise of the river before ever the rains begin to fall, or the high snows to melt upon the hills?' asked 'Abdullah.

"'This year no flood shall cover the land of Khazaina. I, Nasir, have said it. I will build a great bund that shall safeguard the crops, let the river rise as it will.'

"'But if the bund should break?'

"'I have spoken,' said Nasir. And he swore a great oath, by Allah and by his Prophet and by his own honour, that the land should be safe that year."

The mullah paused, spreading out deprecatory palms in implicit apology for one who would so swear, taking upon himself that which only Allah could fulfil.

"So 'Abdullah took the land, and at the first rain he sowed and ploughed, and the young wheat stood green as far as the edge of the desert.

"Shaikh Nasir built the bund, of trodden earth faced with camel-thorn, the work of many tribesmen for many days. Then in due course, as its custom is in spring, the river began to rise. It reached the level of its banks, and crept above

them. It reached the broad strong bund of Nasir's building, and lapped against it. And Nasir, mindful of his oath, set a watchman that night upon the bund, telling him that if he slept and any harm befell, he would cut off his right hand.

"The watchman was Mahdi bin Lazim, who till midnight walked upon the bund, keeping good watch. He saw that it was strong, far higher and broader than it was their custom to build; and as the night was cold, he gave thanks to Allah that his shaikh had builded well, and sat down to rest behind the bund. Thus it chanced that he fell asleep. And while he slept the wind changed, and lashed the swift-flowing river into waves, which beat angrily against the high bund. Now it was newly built, and the earth was still loosely packed, and soon the water found a weak place where a rat had dug her hole.

"At first broke through a thin trickle, like milk from a camel's udder; but Mahdi slept on, and saw it not. When at the first light of dawn his eyes opened, he saw a swift fierce stream pouring through the bund; and he was afraid, for he felt the knife already at his right hand. Hastening to the village, he gathered his family

and his household goods, and crossing the river took shelter with Shaikh Tahir, Nasir's enemy.

"The sun had been up an hour before the news reached Nasir; and he cursed Mahdi and all his forbears, and sent messengers to bring him in. At the same time he sent others to call in all his tribesmen, with their womenfolk and their beasts of burden. But he, with his brothers and all the men of his house, went quickly to the place, and found my sister's husband gazing at the breach, while his women cast earth upon their heads and beat their breasts.

" 'O Protected of Allah,' said 'Abdullah, 'is this the fulfilment of thine oath?'

" 'I will pluck out the eyes of Mahdi, who has thus betrayed me!' said the shaikh—for then as now (added the mullah, dropping his voice) he was terrible in anger.

" 'His eyes, and the eyes of all his family, will not save my crops,' said 'Abdullah. 'It will take many days to close this breach; and two days and two nights of this'—he pointed to the surging water—'will ruin all.'

" 'Thy crops are not yet lost,' answered Nasir. 'Am I to swear again the oath I swore, by Allah and by his Prophet and by mine own honour, that the land should be safe? Nay, but now I

swear, by the good grain that thou shalt surely reap at harvest, the breach shall be closed before tomorrow's sunset.'

"He sent more messengers, to bring in even the old men and the old women, the young girls and the young boys. And those who were already assembled he divided into parties, the women to cut camel-thorn and tamarisk, and the rough grass that grows beside the river, the men to bring earth. Only the strongest men he kept to stem the flow of water.

"Of these, half stood on one side of the breach, half on the other. At a word from the shaikh they rushed into the water, turning their backs to the current, each man staying himself on his *misha,* which he thrust into the ground before him. Thus they tried to check the rush of the water; but the current was fierce and strong, and the quivering *mishas* showed how hard the men had to struggle to keep their footing. In the middle, where the stream was swiftest, not a man could stand for more than a moment; one after another was whirled off his feet. At that time Nasir was some thirty years of age, and at the height of his strength, taller and broader than any man there. Throwing off his garments, he seized a *misha* and dashed into the water, call-

ing upon his brothers to follow him. In the middle of the breach he stood upright, staying the stream with his back as the others did; thus the chain of men met across the breach, and the rush of water was stayed enough for the other workers to begin to make ring bunds, one close to the breach, the other farther back and stronger, lest the first should break.

"Bundles of the camel-thorn brought by the women were laid down, and on them earth was heaped. Some dug it as best they might from beneath the water, others farther afield, two working together to fill an *'aba,* which they would then carry by the corners to the bund. More men formed a line, passing clods of earth from hand to hand.

"Night came; by Allah's mercy the moon was full, and the work went on. The living barrier still held back the flood, men being replaced by fresh men as their strength was exhausted. The women and children still brought their bundles, but more slowly now, as they had to go farther and farther afield to find the scrub. Then came three camels of the shaikh, bearing dates for the hungry labourers; no halt was called, but they ate in hasty mouthfuls, while still striving

against their untiring enemy. For the wind blew still hard from the north, and the strength of the river seemed rather to grow than to lessen.

"All night the work went on. At dawn came a long string of camels and cows, bearing bundles of green barley, freshly cut from the shaikh's own crops, for strengthening the bund. 'Rather would I lose the whole of my barley,' said Nasir, 'than see my word broken.'

"By noon the two ring bunds were finished. The weary men from the water, their faces grey with fatigue, the men worn out with digging earth and carrying, threw themselves down where they were, and slept. The women also, withdrawing a little way apart, slept."

The mullah sank back, the tension of his body relaxed as if the fatigue of that day were with him still. There was silence for a moment before he continued his tale.

"Only Shaikh Nasir and 'Abdullah slept not.

"'Behold,' said Nasir, as he looked at the work which at one time had seemed beyond human compassing, 'behold the promise of thy shaikh!'

"Together they looked at it. Then suddenly, with no warning, part of the first ring bund

crumpled and gave way, letting in a torrent of the angry pent-up water to beat against the second bund. Speechless with anxiety the two men watched. Would it stand the strain? It held—it held—no, a thin trickle was forcing its way through, eating out a channel. It grew wider—so wide—wider.

"With a shout the shaikh leapt to the weak point, calling to the sleeping men to help. But they were deep in slumber, and his voice was hoarse from his ceaseless shouted encouragement of the day before.

"The water began to pour through. In two minutes it would be beyond control. What, then, of his oath?

"Nasir turned to the motionless figures beside the bund. With his giant strength he seized two sleeping men, thrust them into the widening breach, and held them down. 'Abdullah had awakened some of his tribesmen, and, stupid with sleep, they obeyed the shaikh's command, and piled earth and still more earth on the living bodies.

"Thus was the breach closed, and the waters came not to the land of Khazaina, and the honour of Shaikh Nasir was saved."

With a dramatic gesture the mullah ended his tale.

"What happened to the shaikh when this became known?" I asked.

"O Long in Years," the mullah replied simply, "it took place in the time of the Turks."

Chapter V

THE PLACE OF CASTING

AT a pace very different from that of Haji Rikkan's clumsy craft, the graceful *mash-huf* of Shaikh Zamil bore me swiftly down the Chahala canal. It bounded forward in a series of darting leaps, as the paddles of the shaikh's four stout negro slaves struck the water in unison. The slender tapering prow of the little craft rose high in the air, and the dripping blades of its four bright blue paddles caught the sun with each stroke. The boat's inner side was decorated with large, flat-headed iron nails, and all the woodwork was painted a vivid green in strong contrast with the black of its bitumen-coated outer side. Black also were the limbs and faces of the slaves, an ebony blackness which their white garments intensified. And for a last touch of barbaric splendour, a mattress of purple velvet was spread in the bottom of the boat.

On this I sat with Shaikh Zamil, my host of the preceding night. We were on our way to

Qala't Baidha—the White Castle—where I was to meet Haji Rikkan. From time to time the featureless country through which the canal wound its way was relieved by one of the low mounds which in the dreary flatness of the plains of Lower 'Iraq cannot fail to catch the eye. These relics of a far-off past are often used by the tribes as burial grounds, or serve as land-marks on some rarely-used caravan route; one we now passed was called, the shaikh told me, Masubb—and the strange name roused my curiosity. Why Masubb—the Place of Casting? Once, in earlier days, the mound had been surrounded by marshes; but the water, receding year by year as the Tigris brought down its load of silt, had left it high and dry until to-day it stands on land which, once marsh, has become first rice and then wheat and barley growing land.

"Why do they call that mound Masubb?" I asked.

A voice behind me answered, before the shaikh had time to reply, "I kiss thy hand."

I turned to look at the speaker. An old negro, his face seamed and lined with wrinkles, the ends of his grey beard dyed red with henna, laid

down his paddle in order to give his whole attention to his story.

"I will explain," he said. "Well do I know the reason, for the tale was often told me by my mother. And she was bought by the great Faisal for twenty-five liras," he added with pride, as one might mention the fact that one's ancestors came over with the Conqueror.

Most of the shaikhs in 'Iraq are the owners of slaves, who seem to have no quarrel with Fate on the score of their condition. They are as a rule well treated, address their master as "my uncle," and may rise to positions of considerable influence. As is natural in a Muslim country, the yoke of slavery presses most heavily on the women. A female slave may be given by her owner to whom he will in order to add to the number of his slaves, and the child belongs not to her but to her master; even if she is formally married to another slave, with the usual payment of dowry, their child is not freed from bondage to its mother's owner. But though slavery persists, the lot of the slaves has improved since the British connection with this country; and the old man who had been paddling vigorously behind me to-day was evidently one who found slavery to his liking. He

was on the best of terms with his shaikh, and felt quite at liberty to drop his paddle and join in the conversation when it interested him.

"In the days of the great Faisal," he began, "the Albu Mohammad, as now, were cultivators of rice, though not as an independent tribe, for they paid tribute to the Bani Lām. Now Faisal was young, and a proud shaikh, and he counted it a disgrace that his tribe should give tribute to any. Thus one year he made excuses and did not pay, and when after some months messengers came from the shaikh of the Bani Lām ordering him to send at least a part of his dues, he sent them away with insults, openly refusing any longer to acknowledge an overlord.

"Madhkur of the Bani Lām, as proud a man as he, began to collect his tribes at Bahatha, for the over-throwing of his disobedient vassal. Faisal called together his own men likewise. Then came news that Madhkur was building mud forts at Bahatha, and we rejoiced with scorn and taunting, for we thought he was afraid to come down and fight our shaikh in open battle. We rejoiced too early. Soon the reason of his building became apparent: he had brought together not only his armed warriors, but men used to toil in the fields, and these he

had set to building a great dam across the Chahala, from which our rice-fields drink their water. Thus Madhkur achieved his end, with no fighting and without venturing into our marsh country; for Faisal, unable because of the protecting forts to break down the dam, thought it better to pay than to lose the whole of his rice crop—the value of ten years' tribute. But those who sat with him that night say that he broke silence only once, to swear by Allah and in Allah and through Allah that this year of humiliation should be his last of vassaldom.

"After that day his people saw no more of Faisal for many weeks. He shut himself up in his fort, and all we heard of him was an order that no coffee should be drunk in the tribal *madhif* until the stain of this disgrace, should be washed away. Day after day the coffee-beakers stood empty in the unkindled ashes, and the old men who had gathered nightly to talk of war and the good days of their youth came no more to the *madhif*.

"At last Faisal came forth from his fort, smiling the smile of a conqueror, and made a great feast for the headmen of the tribe. None knew what his plan was, save that messengers who had been sent with money to distant Baghdad had

returned, bringing with them two strangers, Saiyid Ghafuri and Salih al Takmaghchi. But after the feast, Faisal gave orders to his mullah that every family, both of his own tribe and of those who owed allegiance to him, should send him copper vessels, each household to the utmost of its ability.

"The order went forth among the people, and they hastened to obey, for Faisal was a shaikh whose bidding it were best to do quickly. They sent in cooking pots of copper, and coffee pots of every size, from the tiny *dalla* to the heavy *gumgum;* trays they sent and water vessels and *mushkhanas.* There was no stint nor holding back, for it was said that the shaikh was in need of copper for the making of a mighty spell against the Bani Lām.

"Faisal chose the *ishan* we have passed, that which men now call Masubb, for the place to which all the tribes should bring their gifts of copper. Here, where the surrounding marshes gave him security from his enemies, he set to work, building a mighty furnace. Every day from dawn to sunset came *mashhufs* from all the neighbouring tribes, bringing reeds and rushes to heat it, and every day came more *mashhufs*

with household vessels from the more distant settlements.

"Saiyid Ghafuri and Salih directed the work. They showed the shaikh's men how to make moulds of dried mud, each one in a deep pit. The copper vessels were heated in the furnace, and the molten metal poured into the moulds. All the tribesmen made *hosa,* running round the smoking pits, shaking their swords and lances, praising the cunning of Faisal.

"The shaikh and all his people waited breathlessly for the cannon which the Saiyid had said should be made of their copper vessels; but alas, there was no success. Then Faisal ordered that the furnace be rekindled and the metal melted once more, for he had set his hand to the task, and would not own to failure. This time sheep were slain as a sacrifice to Allah, but still with no good result, so that the people began to murmur, asking one another how it could be possible for them, ignorant folk of the marshes, to make cannon such as the Turks used in their wars against other great nations. And those who had spent many days in bringing fuel for the furnace begged leave to return to their homes, saying that it was now the turn of others.

"But Faisal would not listen. He ordered the people to bring in more rushes, as much again as they had brought before. And for the third time the furnace was heated, many hundreds of men running to and fro with more fuel and still more, while the shaikh himself stood by and encouraged them with cheering words. And this time, Allah was gracious.

"When under the direction of the Saiyid the cannon had been taken from their moulds, some of the men were set to smoothing them with roughened iron, others the shaikh set to make powder. That was a great work, of which men talked far and wide, so that the Bani Lām heard of the hostile plans of our tribe, and their shaikh with many followers came out with war flags against us. But Faisal determined to attack his enemies, and free himself once and for all from their yoke.

"Their forces, many hundreds of horsemen, were collected at Abu Husainiya, on the great bund which protects their land from the Tigris floods. But when the men of the Albu Mohammad in their boats saw how many were gathered against them, they were unwilling to land, saying that though they feared no enemy in their own marsh country, they could not hope

to match the mounted men of the Bani Lām in the open desert.

"Then Faisal spoke to his people, and promised them horses more fleet than those of the enemy. He kept his word, for he had brought his cannon on boats lashed two by two, and with them he drove the Bani Lām from off the great bund."

"Were many killed?" I asked.

"The Albu Mohammad fired but once," replied the negro, looking doubtfully towards the great-grandson of Faisal.

"It is permitted. Speak!" said Shaikh Zamil.

"They fired but one of the cannon," went on the slave, "and it split in pieces like an over-ripe melon. Those it killed were of our own people, yet it was the Bani Lām who fled for their terror at the great noise. Then with spades the Albu Mohammad broke down the bund, and the swift waters rushed in over the dry land, overtaking the horses of the Bani Lām. Great was their defeat, and their yoke was lifted from us. Thus, Effendim, our Faisal brought freedom to the people."

The old slave took up his paddle once more and fell to work, crooning softly under his breath. The song was a pathetic link with his

unknown freedom, for the words, meaningless to him, were those which are sung to their children by the mothers of far-off Africa.

A strange story he had told of pluck and energy, of one man's will overcoming obstacles which might well have seemed insuperable! It was hardly credible that nearly a century ago an untaught shaikh of these wild marshes should not only have conceived such a project, but should have carried it through to success. I should have been inclined to doubt the old slave's story, had I not heard of the cannon from other sources, and learned of the disaster which in the end they brought upon Faisal and his tribe. On this point the negro had been silent.

In those days, the tribes on the Tigris, between Baghdad and Basra were left by the Turks to their own devices. But news of their growing strength, perhaps even of the existence of Faisal's guns, reached the ears of the distant rulers, who resolved to break the tribes before it was too late. Thus the Albu Mohammad, after one short taste of liberty, found themselves under a yoke far heavier than that of the Bani Lām, and under masters far more tyrannical, grasping, and corrupt. The guns were taken to Baghdad; and I wondered whether, among the

collection of disused, antiquated cannon found in the Citadel after the fall of the town, were numbered the clumsy, home-made, splendid guns of that fine old warrior Faisal.

By this time we had reached the rice-land—country which in Shaikh Faisal's time had been marsh. The villages were little more than two single lines of reed huts straggling along beside the river for perhaps nearly a mile. On one bank the doorways opened upon the river; to the other bank each hut turned its back, for the entrance of every dwelling must face towards Mecca. Only the houses of Saiyids and *mumins* were here placed broadside to the river, to warn a thief that in daring to rob such a house he would be guilty of sacrilege as well as theft; and one or two traders had sought to secure immunity for their goods by adopting the same device.

Between the villages, scores of small channels took off at right angles to the main stream. At this time of the year their water was heavy with the rich silt which they were carrying on to the rice-fields. To the rice cultivator the amount of silt brought down by the river means as much as his rainfall to the grower of wheat and barley, for the yield of the crop varies in direct propor-

tion to the depth of the silt deposit in which the rice is planted.

It was from these rich and wide rice-fields that Shaikh Zamil derived the wealth which had made possible last night's lavish hospitality. His *madhif* was the largest I had every seen—one hundred and eight feet in length, and eighteen in width; its height cannot have been less than eighteen feet. No material other than reeds, brought from the marshes, had gone to its construction. Its plan was that of the ordinary marsh hut, but its builders had been master-craftsmen, who had spared no pains to make this *madhif* a superb specimen of its kind. The twenty-one arches of its framework, composed of bundles of reeds wound round with plaited rush ropes at regular intervals, were perfectly symmetrical in their gradual tapering upwards to the roof. The woven mats which formed the curved roof showed an orderly and regular overlapping. The lower part of the walls, to a height of about four feet, was composed of a lattice-work of reeds through which the air came freshly. Smoothly-plaited reed mats covered the floor; the square coffee-hearth near the doorway was surrounded by a rounded ledge of mud. At the far end were spread fine Persian carpets.

On two or three silk-covered mattresses were piled scores of velvet and silken cushions, blue and green, orange and scarlet—a single bright mass of colour which threw into high relief the simplicity and fine proportions of the building.

Here we had seated ourselves. Though the evening was far from cold, a slave entered with a brass brazier heaped with glowing charcoal, from which rose the faint scent of incense. Other slaves, more richly dressed than their master, brought in tea and coffee, and offered cigarettes. Beside the shaikh sat a small child, perhaps eight years old, a demure, dark-eyed little girl—the only one of her sex present in the great *madhif*—who, accompanying her tall bearded father as the favourite daughter of a shaikh often does, should have made a charming picture of Arab childhood. But, alas! she was dressed in pseudo-European fashion, with feathered hat and tan buttoned boots: another outlet for one small fraction of Zamil's superfluous wealth.

On his domestic affairs, indeed, a great part of this was expended. As a strict Mohammedan, Zamil only permitted himself four wives; but his religion placed no restriction on the number of times these four might be changed. Quietly

and without ostentation one of the four reigning queens would be divorced and sent back to her home; then, with rejoicing and acclamation, feasting and merry-making, another wife would come to rule over the unstable heart of Shaikh Zamil.

Some two hours after our arrival a coloured cloth was spread on the floor, and the evening meal began to make its appearance—began, for it was a long business. In common with many other tribal leaders, Zamil possessed wealth enough to have enabled him to emulate the princes of Arab folk-tales, and feast his guests with the costly if unsatisfying luxury of dishes heaped with gold; but this idea had fortunately not occurred to him, and the meal was the normal Arab supper, differing from that of humbler folk only in the variety of food and the number of servants.

First came the shaikh, bearing in his hand a dish which he placed carefully on the cloth. Behind him came a string of slaves and retainers, each with two dishes, a seemingly endless procession. Soon the cloth was covered with great mounds of rice, roast chickens and wild duck, savoury stews, plates of honey and ground rice, sweet pastries made with date juice; but still the

stream of servants entered at the arched doorway, plates were pushed more closely to make room, and soon the whole floor was covered.

As I looked down the long *madhif,* and in the dim light of the lanterns held up at intervals by slaves saw the great white mounds of rice in diminishing perspective, saw the whole roast sheep and the deep bowls of sherbet, I thought of other meals, when a few plates of food had been put on a round mat, and Haji Rikkan and his nephews had eaten with me from a common dish. At such meals one shares the family life. And for another reason I recalled those simple meals: the mighty feast before me had taken so long to bring in that every dish was stone cold!

Now in the afternoon sunshine we went on between river banks which became ever lower until they disappeared altogether, and we found ourselves on a stretch of open water which I might have thought mere marsh, had I not the shaikh's word that below it lay his richest rice-lands. As the water of the marsh receded, all this area would be gradually uncovered, and here would be grown the *shittal* rice, sown upstream, but transplanted into this deep silt by hand. Beyond, ahead of us, lay a line of reeds which marked the beginning of the marsh

proper, and above them we could see the turrets of Zamil's fort, Qala't Baidha, gleaming white in the sun. Like some fairy fortress it looked as we approached; but disillusion followed. The smooth marble walls of the castle were of sun-dried mud, the battlements and turrets were the crudest products of Arab moulding.

Shaikh Zamil now took his leave, and I climbed alone to the top of one of the towers. As the fort had been built for defence, the ascent was not easy; a very low entrance had first to be negotiated on hands and knees; then came a ladder of stout reeds which, when climbed, could be drawn up after one. I hauled myself at length on to the flat roof, and looked over the battlements at the many-coloured view.

Towards the east, in unbroken ranks, lay mile upon mile of reeds, a solid phalanx stretching as far as the eye could see. Upright as "spears and javelins in array" they stood, while the slanting sunlight glanced from their heads as though from spikes of silver. So dense a mass seemed impenetrable, impossible of navigation; but even as I watched, a slim black craft slipped from some hidden channel and made its way towards the *ishan* on which Qala't Baidha stood. It was Haji Rikkan's.

Westwards the water was open, except for a few clumps of tall reeds which already looked black against the evening sky. Beyond them I could see Shaikh Zamil's *mashhuf,* a tiny black crescent on the stretch of water we had crossed; already he had reached the turbid brown of the silt-laden water. Far in the distance one could make out the rounded roofs of a rice-growers' village, the only sign of habitation in the vast expanse over which I gazed.

Qala't Baidha was manned by a score or so of Zamil's *hoshiya,* whose ostensible duty it was to maintain law and order in the marsh area held by him. A sarcastic comment from Haji Rikkan, who joined me now on the roof, informed me that the shaikh's real interest lay less in maintaining order than in levying toll on all the marsh craft which passed his fort.

"How do I know this?" the Haji went on. "I know because I myself suffer from his exactions, and also—" here his eyes lit up with mirth—"because I myself, when I was a *chaoush* in the time of the Turks, did no otherwise."

Seated on the roof while the dying sun sank into the sea of gold before us, while the short twilight turned to darkness and the orange

moon rose, I listened to the reminiscences of Haji Rikkan. They were not recounted in the chronological sequence in which they are here set forth, but as the old man's rambling memory served him, one incident leading to another. The wealth of expressive gesture, the play of feature which illuminated them, cannot, alas! be recaptured by the written word.

Chapter VI

THE FORT OF KASSARA

HAJI RIKKAN'S first footing on the ladder of fame—a footing insecure and not to be long retained—was gained as an indirect result of the "Great War," a phrase which to him meant the intermittent conflict which went on during his early manhood between the Bani Lām and the Albu Mohammad, the two great tribal confederations of the lower Tigris.

"Lost by a living woman, won by a dead," he said of the first battle of that long-drawn-out struggle; and at this paradox the lines round his shrewd old eyes deepened with secret delight as he waited the inevitable demand for an explanation.

"Eight thousand, nay, ten thousand were slain in that war, which the folly of one man brought about. It happened that Ibn Madhkur, shaikh of the Bani Lām, left his great flocks in the care of Dhamad of the Chanana, while he himself went to Mohammerah. And while he was

absent, Dhamad sold the wool of Ibn Madhkur's sheep, and used in his own tents the butter made from their milk, and killed many for food. When Ibn Madhkur returned his anger was great; he deprived Dhamad of the shaikhship, and seized all his possessions—verily a hard punishment.

"So Dhamad fled across the river to Saihud, lord of the Albu Mohammad, and making *dakhala* besought him to intercede with Ibn Madhkur for the recovery of his flocks. But Ibn Madhkur would not listen to the entreaties of Saihud, and thus began war between them. Each side prepared for battle. The men made *hosa,* chanting their war-songs, shaking swords and lances to the beat as they ran in circles round the battle-flags held high in the air. Thus did they steel their hearts for the fray. And while they prepared for war, Ibn Madhkur, Shaikh of the Bani Lām, took to himself a new wife.

"For many generations has Sa'da been a famous name among the Bani Lām. Hast not even to-day heard them called the Brothers of Sa'da? This Sa'da whom Ibn Madhkur wedded was the daughter of Risan, shaikh of a shepherd tribe dwelling in the foothills. So

great was her beauty that all men marvelled; and as for Ibn Madhkur, he saw naught else—not his tribes ready for war, nor the gathering hosts of the enemy making *hosa,* nor the danger that threatened. And when his headmen urged him to advance, for they feared the wide river so close behind them, their words were meaningless in his ears.

"Now the father of Sa'da was a stern man, an Arab of the Arabs. One day, when Ibn Madhkur was absent for a brief hour, he entered his daughter's tent; kissing her eyes, he put into her hand a small curved dagger whose handle of horn was embossed with silver.

"She, running to the tent door as he would have stridden away, caught his robe, whispering, 'Why this? Must my hand strike him, and I his wife?'

"And Risan answered sternly, 'Because of thee this dalliance; because of thee this danger of defeat. Why should it be our lord that dies?' Thus saying, he left the tent.

"Ibn Madhkur returned, and hastened within to his wife's arms. All the camp heard the great cry which left his throat, and soon all knew that Sa'da was like to die from the wound in her side. Day and night Ibn Madhkur

sat watching the life that wished to leave her body.

"Well might she weep to her women when speech returned to her, well might she lament. *'Wai, wai,* unworthy daughter I. Because I was weak and timid, I struck not deep enough; and now of what avail my act?' For Ibn Madhkur remained by her side, nor would he leave her to attack the Albu Mohammad. And when his headmen came to him, he said, 'We are many, they few. Spare our mares. Go ye, attack on foot.' Even when a messenger brought news of the battle, saying, 'We prevail not!' he would not leave her tent, but said, 'Let the Bani Lām take to their horses, and attack again.' O fateful words!

"As the tribes turned to fetch their horses from the tethering ground by the river bank, a woman on the side of the Albu Mohammad saw the chance of victory, and in her turn swayed the tide of battle. Makia, sister of Saihud, saw the Bani Lām turn to the river; lifting up her dress to her neck she ran towards them, crying aloud, 'Either the Bani Lām will ravish me, or the Albu Mohammad will save me from them!' And at her words her brother's people pressed forward, attacked fiercely, and prevailed. The

Bani Lām, leaderless and in disorder, turned and fled.

"The sounds of panic reached Ibn Madhkur in his tent, and at last he awoke from his dream. Hastily he bore Sa'da in his arms to a boat, and bade his servant take her to the other side. Then he rushed to the fray—but too late. Pressed by the furious onslaught of the Albu Mohammad, his tribesmen could not escape because of the river at their back; they were swept by hundreds into the Tigris; few reached the other side. Tents, horses, arms, cattle, powder, harness—everything was captured. Never was victory so complete, never defeat so overwhelming.

"On the far bank of the river Sa'da lay dying, for the hasty moving had opened again her half-healed wound. She called feebly on her father's name, begging his forgiveness. 'Ah wretched me,' she mourned, 'I must die, yet my death has not availed to save the Bani Lām.'

"Suddenly her women scattered before a galloping horse, whose trembling sides still dripped with water. The rider, naked and bleeding from a hundred wounds, flung himself off and knelt beside her. It was Ibn Madhkur. Taking her in his arms, he said, 'Because of thee

and of the life that is leaving thee, I swear that never will I rest until the Bani Lām, now broken and scattered, are brought together and made more powerful than before. This will I do for love of thee, O Sa'da!'

"And fulfil the vow he did, though Allah alone knows how," said Haji Rikkan, spreading expressive hands. "By valour and brave deeds, by intrigue and cunning where it served his ends, he rallied the tribes round him; by fair words and gifts he gained adherents; by skilful husbanding he replaced the treasure lost on that day of loss, and purchased arms. But why say more? Thou knowest as well as I that the end was defeat for the Albu Mohammad."

The Haji in his remote marsh village had not been affected by the early stages of his war, which the Turks in pursuance of their policy of "divide et impera" did nothing to abate. But later, when traffic was hindered and passengers were wounded by stray shots exchanged across the river by the rival factions, the government felt constrained to take action. According to Haji Rikkan, one of its first moves was to strengthen the garrisons of the small mud forts along the banks of the Tigris; to do this it was necessary to deplete the garrisons lower down

the river, in the unhealthy marsh country; and here Haji Rikkan saw his chance.

Emboldened by his experiences as a pilgrim to Karbala, he visited the *yuzbashi*—captain of the local gendarmerie, at Qala't Salih, the largest riverside town in the marsh area. As a Haji he obtained a respectful hearing; a judicious distribution of osprey feathers and what little money he possessed did the rest. He was appointed *chaoush* or sergeant of the mud fort at Kassara, and was told to enlist his own force of six. A month's pay for himself and his men was at once handed to him, and this was the only wage he received during the three years of his command. But the Haji was content.

Content, indeed, he well might be. Not only did the title of *chaoush* alone delight the naïve vanity which still characterized him in old age; not only had he, a marshman of the marshes, risen to eminence in the world outside; the position gave him every opportunity of making and saving money. A true Arab, Haji Rikkan let slip no chance of gain.

Kassara is situated a few miles above Ezra's Tomb, just where a stream of clear blue water from the marsh flows into the Tigris, running for some distance on its own side of the river

bed before its beautiful pellucid depths become muddied as they mingle with the silt-laden Tigris. Opposite the mouth of the stream stood Haji Rikkan's mud fort, or rather his toll-bar; for no *danak, birkash, mashhuf, torrada,* or *challabiya* did he allow to issue from the marshes until its owner had paid tribute. If it was bringing fish for sale, the Haji demanded a fifth of their value; reeds, feathers, mats, wild-fowl, all were estimated by his ruthless eye, and on all the toll was levied. Nothing escaped the Haji, and he knew that he could go on his mildly oppressive way with impunity. As long as the Turkish authority at Qala't Salih was "eating" the salary of himself and his six men, his misdeeds would be looked at with a blind eye. No attention would be paid to tales of his illegal perquisites, even if the marsh folk, fearful of any encounter with the government, dreamed of making official complaint. The Haji grew rich; and at length, becoming rapacious through long immunity, brought about his own downfall.

A message from the *yuzbashi* one day informed Haji Rikkan that a valuable roll of silk had been stolen by marsh Arabs in a raid on a river steamer. He was bidden to make full enquiries, and to communicate at once with his

superiors if he gleaned any information which might lead to the capture of the thieves.

"On my head be it," said Haji Rikkan cheerfully to the messenger. He was delighted with the simplicity of the task; all he had to do was to listen to the *tail bardi,* the telegraph of the reeds—the common phrase for Rumour. He would have accepted the charge less lightheartedly, perhaps, had he known that not the *yuzbashi* alone but several higher functionaries were seriously perturbed about this very roll of silk; that it was the property of a British firm which, weary of similar losses, had referred the matter to the Consul at Basra, who in his turn had referred it to the British Resident at Baghdad. The position held by the Resident was unique; hastily the Wali of Baghdad issued to the Mutasarrif of the district concerned such explicit orders for the immediate recovery of the silk—orders couched in such cold and threatening terms—that the local officials trembled for the continued tenure of their lucrative posts. No stone, they felt, must be left unturned; the Wali's unwelcome attention must at all costs be diverted elsewhere.

Of this activity in higher spheres Haji Rikkan knew nothing. For several days he paddled

about the marsh, listening to local gossip and asking discreet questions from time to time. Rumour, as usual, was busy; but at length he heard from more than one source a story which seemed to have the ring of truth. The thieves were said to be in hiding on a certain *ishan* known as Umm Dibis, only a short way into the marsh; they hoped at night to intercept a sailing boat on her slow way upstream, and sell their booty to its owner.

Haji Rikkan was in two minds. If he went to the *yuzbashi* with this tale, the thieves might in the meantime sell their loot and escape; in any case, as he had no proofs, he and his story might be discredited. On the other hand, if he alone were to recover the stolen silk, what promotions, what rewards, what opportunities might not be his! Cupidity prevailed. Secretly he arranged that his half-brother Husain, with another of his garrison by name Ridha, should spy out the land.

The Haji's thoughts, he told me, were far from the bale of silk when a few days later he sat in his eyrie, idly speculating what "customs" duty he would be able to reap from a *mashhuf* which was coming slowly towards him. As it approached, his keen eyes saw that it was empty;

and calling one of the village boys, he bade him bring it in. With swift strokes of his paddle the boy drove his own small craft into midstream, and rose to catch the high prow of the drifting boat; then, with a shrill cry, he came paddling madly back again. "Blood, blood!" he cried, and fled to his hut.

In some trepidation Haji Rikkan put off himself with three of his men to bring in the mysterious *mashhuf*. Lying in the bottom they found two dead or dying men; in the body of one of them a long curved dagger was still fast, while between them, in strange contrast to those grim, still forms, lay a bundle, half-unrolled, of rich orange-coloured silk. Stained with blood, crumpled as though it had been clutched and struggled over, its shining folds were still beautiful, gleaming and shimmering in the sunset light: surely of the very essence of temptation to the colour-loving Arab.

The two men were lifted out of the boat. The one with the dagger in his side, Ridha, was dead. Husain stirred and groaned as he was moved.

"We bore him to his house," said Haji Rikkan. "Later his women fetched me, and I knew by their grief that he had not many hours to live.

" 'My brother, my brother,' whispered Husain when he saw me. 'Hear the story of my death, that thou mayst avenge me. Before I die, hear how I brought back the silk. Very quietly and with stealth, hardly moving, I and that other—May he burn!—drew near to the *ishan* of Umm Dibis. Peering through the reeds, we could see that rumour had not lied; the thieves were there. Two seemed to be sleeping, the third was on guard with his rifle on the only channel leading to the *ishan*. Silently, having seen all we needed to see, we made our way back a long distance, and discussed how we could best seize the silk. It seemed impossible. If we went up the channel, however quickly, the man on guard would shoot us; however quietly we crept through the reeds, our movements would be heard, nor could we get near enough to shoot with certainty. At last Ridha said, 'The smaller the noise, the greater the danger. Let us make a great noise as of buffaloes grazing.' So we agreed, and crashed in among the reeds, advancing towards the *ishan,* then retreating a little, but ever drawing nearer and nearer. At last we saw our chance, and rushed in. Two of the men we killed; the third escaped, and we troubled not to chase him, for there in the bottom of their

mashhuf we found the stolen silk. Hastening back as fast as we might, before the third man could bring help against us, we reached the river and set on our way downstream.

"'As we went, Ridha unfolded a little of the silk. It was very beautiful, smooth and shining like the soft cheek of a bride, and there were many spans. Ridha fingered it.

"'By 'Ali son of Abu Talib,' he exclaimed, 'have we risked our lives only to give silk such as this, the price of many women, back to the Dowla?' He unfolded more and more. 'It were madness to give this up. Is it not ours by right? None need ever know.'

"'It were shame on Haji Rikkan to take it,' I said, but Ridha cried, 'A curse upon his father! We two alone have recovered the silk, and half of it is mine.' Again I refused, whereupon he grew angry, and snatching the silk tried to jump with it from the boat; but I held fast, and pulled him back. He turned on me, and we drew our daggers.'

"He could tell no more," said Haji Rikkan. "But it was enough; before the dawn he died. As for me, I hid the roll, waiting until I could restore it to the *yuzbashi*. Each day I looked at it, thinking it a sad thing that the kinsfolk of

Husain should profit nothing by that for which he had paid so dear a price. And when my wife saw the silk, it seemed to her more beautiful than anything her eyes had seen; long she gazed on it, stroking and smoothing it with her hands, and when she heard that I purposed to send it to the *yuzbashi* she wept sore, being desirous to keep it for her own adorning.

"Why should she not? I said to my own heart. If the *yuzbashi* hears by chance that I have found it, can I not deny it? Or what were simpler perhaps, he and I can share it. And even if he take it all, I am no loser, for he who has licked the fat from my beard will not dare to punish me."

Thus in a rash moment Haji Rikkan yielded to his wife's entreaties. The roll of silk was hidden beneath a pile of rice, to be stealthily gloated over at night, by firelight, when the two were safe from intrusion.

For some time no more was heard of the silk; but at last the keen eyes of one of the Haji's men sighted, coming slowly towards the fort, the white-painted boat of the Mudir from Qala't Salih. Haji Rikkan was no sooner warned than he took precautions; whatever the object of this official visitation, a wetting would do the silk no

harm, and who would think of searching the river bed for it? He dragged it hastily from its hiding-place, and threw it into the water. His next step was to draw up his men on the bank, in a line as ragged as the tattered garments which, civilian in origin, had been militarized by the addition of two cartridge belts to each man, and to give the Mudir as martial a salute as they could achieve. No neglect on the part of Haji Rikkan Chaoush should ruffle the temper of Jamil Effendi.

"Thou knowest him well," said Haji Rikkan in parenthesis.

"That Jamil?" I exclaimed.

"The same."

I did know him well—a Turkish official of the best type, now a pensioner of the 'Iraq Government in the little town which he had once ruled. Kindly, humane, and honest, he had given loyal service for nearly half a century to a government of which the ineptitude and indolence would have driven any official but a Turk to line his pockets, or tender his resignation, or die of a broken heart. Jamil Effendi did none of these things, but with gentle detachment and in the face of every discouragement pursued his dignified way, year after year.

It is not usual for an Oriental to come to the point of his visit either promptly or directly; but according to the Haji, Jamil revealed the object of his descent upon the mud fort with a disarming directness which lent a hollow ring to his own protestations of innocence.

"They say," he began, "that the stolen silk is in thy house. By Allah, a lie! But those above us have bidden me search. Disturb not thyself, it is but a small matter—a cursory search, and I depart. Thus will our superiors be satisfied with thee and me."

If the search conducted by Jamil Effendi was cursory, the Haji wondered what a thorough search would be like. Every possession of himself and his family was carried outside. Rolled-up mats were spread flat, the young reeds stacked for buffalo-fodder and the *bardi* stored for fuel were pulled down, the roof was tested for a place of concealment, and finally the earthen floor was dug up. Shrill screams from the Haji's wife announced that their hidden store of wealth, the savings of a lifetime, had been laid bare; but it was not confiscated. Under the Mudir's eye it was counted out and restored to her.

During the search the Mudir had stood by in silence, surrounded by a slowly-nearing circle

of naked, curious children. With dignified benevolence he would now and again bestow on one a pat on the head, on another a small coin; and when his clerk came out to tell him that the search has been unrewarded, and the two walked slowly along the river bank in conversation, the children followed. The Haji saw him turn and question them, and saw his own son answering.

Haji Rikkan spoke indulgently of the boy—"*Fidwa ilak,* a sacrifice for thee," he said, using the tribal euphemism for "dead." He would not believe that the child had betrayed him by word or gesture; all was laid at the door of the effendi's guile. It cannot have been difficult for Jamil Effendi, with his knowledge of human nature gained in a lifetime of official service, to glean the truth by cross-examining a small and naked son of the marsh.

Fear first seized the heart of Haji Rikkan when he saw the clerk approach a *muhaila* banked-in near by, and borrow her four-pointed anchor, with a length of rope. From a safe distance he watched the systematic dragging of the river; then, when he heard a shout from one of the draggers, he took off and folded his *'aba.* Balancing it and his rifle on his head, he slipped silently down the bank into the river; with strong

strokes he reached the shelter of the reeds on the other side. There he was safe, for the marsh does not give up her fugitive children; but with bitterness of heart he realized that, after all his fair fortune, he was now a poorer man by far than on the day on which he first took service with the Padishah.

Chapter VII

THE COMING OF THE ENGLISH

THE years following upon his hasty flight to the marshes were bitter ones to Haji Rikkan. At no time are Arabs over-merciful to the unfortunate, and many of the marshfolk had suffered considerably from the Haji's exactions. His welcome was therefore not a warm one, though the fact that he was in flight from the hated government earned him more sympathy than he deserved.

Ever ready to vaunt his superior attainments, Haji Rikkan now found little scope for them. He had already learned that only outside the limits of the marshes could he use his talents to advantage. Now, not only was he confined within these limits, a fugitive from justice, but he had returned penniless to his tribe. With a little money behind him, he might have attained to some small measure of eminence; but even his native wit could do little with the capital he possessed—a coarse woollen *'aba,* the usual Arab head-dress of *kafiya* and *'agal,* and a rifle, which all too soon had to be exchanged

for a far inferior weapon in order that he might have a little money for his pressing needs. For no sooner had his guilt been established than the Mudir's gendarmes had seized everything of value in his hut; his not inconsiderable store of money was appropriated; and his buffaloes, which by evil chance were grazing near by, were driven off—Husain's wife, convinced that her husband's death lay at the Haji's door, having been careful to point them out.

For some years, then, Haji Rikkan lived a precarious life. He was beginning to wonder whether his offence was forgotten, whether he might once more venture into the great world, when strange rumours began to reach the ears of the marshfolk. The Turks had fair words for everyone; shaikhs, to their unbounded surprise, received *chiswas,* or presents of clothing; arrears of pay, long regarded as irrecoverable, began to reach even the humblest of the Padisha's servants.

"When I heard these strange tidings," said the Haji, "hope stirred in my breast. At last, I said, the Constitution, at last Liberty has reached the borders of our marshes. But I was wrong. While we talked and wondered, the message came: a *Jihad,* a *Jihad!* The English infidels have come from the sea, and are at Basra!

"Soon we knew that it was indeed war, for we saw ships full of Turkish soldiers pass down the river. Rumours flew thick as birds. Some said the English had been driven back into the sea, others that they had beaten the Turks and slain their commander. We knew not what to believe. But with our own eyes we saw more ships bearing soldiers down to Basra, and again ships filled with tribesmen, and bands of tribesmen marching on foot southwards on the river bank. Then at last we heard that a great battle had been fought at Qurna.

"The first news of the fight was brought to the marshes by Gata' bin Shamkhi, a man well known to us as a flag-bearer of Shaikh Falih of the Albu Mohammad.

" 'I have heard the noise of guns before,' he said, 'but never such guns as these which come from the sea. Such a thunder it was that I became deaf, and in fear threw myself into the shelter of a water-channel. And presently I heard all round me the sound of men running in terror. 'How can we fight against these Christians,' they cried, 'when their prophet Isa [1] himself is in the sky to aid them?' So I, throwing

[1] The first aeroplane seen by the tribes was taken by them for Jesus Christ coming in person.

away my flag, ran with them. Who am I to fight against a Prophet?' "

Panic-stricken, but by no means roughly handled, the tribal levies fled from Qurna and scattered to their flocks and fields. The Turkish soldiers, infected by the general fear, followed them, a beaten and broken rabble—so broken, according to Haji Rikkan, that the marsh women, armed only with wooden clubs, were able to reap a rich harvest of army rifles.

At length came the opportunity for which Haji Rikkan had waited so long. One spring evening, just before darkness fell, a large Turkish gunboat ran aground above Kassara, the place at which the Haji had lorded it as *chaoush* of the mud fort. From the shelter of the reeds many hundred pairs of eyes watched the heavy boat as, hampered by her lighters lashed on either side, she struggled in the shallow water in vain. She was stuck fast. Soldiers began to unlash the lighters; and, directing them, Haji Rikkan recognized the *yuzbashi* who had appointed him to his former post.

Evidently the Turks were in trouble; this was not the moment to recall a bale of stolen silk. But if a service were rendered, might not the *yuzbashi* remember the many months' salary due

to his underling, and not only remember, but pay? Not without trepidation, Haji Rikkan approached the ship and respectfully greeted him.

To his relief, he was warmly welcomed. He seemed to be the very man for whom the *yuzbashi* was looking. Other officers were called, and an eager discussion followed of which Haji Rikkan, ignorant of Turkish as he was, understood not a word.

"Did the Haji want to earn some money?" asked the Turk at length in Arabic. He trickled a few liras from one hand into the palm of the other. A fifth of the booty should be his reward, and a golden lira in the hand to each man who helped him.

"Dost see the tall masts of the ship below 'Uzair?"[1] went on the *yuzbashi,* in tones of which the urgency impressed Haji Rikkan with a sense of vital danger. Peering through the gathering dusk he could just make out the tall, spreading spars of a ship which on that flat expanse of reeds and water seemed to tower into the sky.

"She is the Mother of Gold indeed," the officer continued. "She is full of gold to pay the English soldiers with—gold of which one fifth

[1] Ezra's tomb.

shall be thine if the crew is dead and the ship taken before morning; for if she is still there when the sun rises, this ship is doomed, and we are dead men."

Haji Rikkan, with nothing to lose and everything to gain, accepted the offer. To raid and steal from a river boat was part of the ordinary day's work to a marsh Arab. With his naked body well greased to elude capture, he would slip silently into the water, float downstream, and take up his position under the hull of the ship. There in the shadow, his dark features indistinguishable from above, he would wait and listen perhaps for hours, until the moment came for him to climb swiftly and stealthily on board, seize what he could, and dropping overboard swim under water back into the covering reeds. Just such a plan, to be carried out on a larger scale, Haji Rikkan now outlined to the *yuzbashi*.

Late that night, after the moon had set, a hundred naked marshmen slid into the water. Each man held a dagger in his teeth, and each pushed before him a bundle of rushes, partly to support his weight, partly to hide the suspicious roundness of the human head on the surface of the water. Led by the Haji, they ap-

proached the English gunboat; not a sound came from her decks, hardly a splash from the river. Yet suddenly a great beam of light leapt from her bows and shone full in the dazzled faces of the swimmers. *"W'Allah,* I thought it was the eye of Allah himself!" said Haji Rikkan as he told the story. Desperately the panic-stricken marshmen struck out for the shore, but too late. The ship's machine guns spat viciously as the searchlight swept from side to side of the river. In a few moments all was quiet, but the muddy Tigris waters as they flowed past the gunboat were streaked with blood.

Haji Rikkan escaped the hail of bullets; but this adventure with its disastrous ending convinced him at last that he was not cut out for a military career. He beat a hasty retreat, not even waiting to hear the fate of the stranded Turkish vessel which he had failed to save. He heard later, from Arabs who had watched to the end, that the Turks had worked all night in the effort to refloat their gunboat, but without success. At the first gleam of daylight, as the *yuzbashi* had foretold, shells from the English ship came hurtling through the air, the first falling beyond its mark, the second short, but the third and subsequent ones hitting with deadly

accuracy. Soon the Turkish gunboat was in flames, and her crew began to abandon her. This emboldened the marsh Arabs, who fell to looting rifles and ammunition from the lighters, murdering the wounded Turks and such stragglers as they found among the reeds. Only on the approach of the English ship did they in their turn flee into the marsh. This was not a pleasant picture of the people among whom I now wandered in Haji Rikkan's company, but it is undeniable that all the worst and most savage characteristics of the *Ma'dan* showed themselves to both armies during the war.

Haji Rikkan returned discouraged to his home. But the times were too stirring not to provide a man of his restless spirit with an opportunity. It seemed to the marsh Arabs that all the river boats of the world were being assembled on the Tigris. Never had such daily, hourly temptation presented itself. An ideal opening for thieves[1] was offered by the slow steam-boats, labouring upstream through the Narrows with their loads of food-stuffs, forage,

[1] As far back as the time of Harun al Rashid, the marshmen were notorious for looting and levying tolls on river craft. Later they even succeeded in cutting off the supplies of Baghdad, and an expedition (A.D. 834) was sent against them, several thousand being exiled to Asia Minor, whence they made their way to Europe as gypsies

ammunition, medical stores, all the complex necessities of an army. The lumbering barges lashed to each side of the steamers would every now and again graze the bank on one side, or brush against the tall reeds on the other; what wonder that the *Ma'dan* blessed Allah and profited? So few rifles could be spared from the fighting line to guard the lines of communication that the raiders grew bold; scorning the protection of darkness, they would spring in broad daylight out of the reeds on to a passing barge, seize what lay to hand, and dive overboard in defiance of the ragged volley which so seldom found its mark.

But the shipping, inexhaustible as it seemed to the *Ma'dan,* was unable to supply all the needs of the ever-growing army. The marshfolk watched uncomprehendingly the building of the "shammandaffar" (chemin de fer) along the only strip of firm ground which threaded their fastnesses; but when they had overcome their terror of the iron monster, its tail of trucks became as popular a source of wealth as the river barges had been. As the long train slowed down to negotiate one of the many curves of the line, nothing could be easier for a marshman than to swing himself up on to a truck and topple to

the ground a few bags of wheat, atta, or sugar. To check these depredations the military authorities reluctantly placed sepoy guards on the trucks, and the prospect of meeting cold steel made the railway line less attractive until the marsh Arabs, ever inventive in wrong-doing, made grappling irons by tying long ropes to the barbed, five-pronged heads of their fishing spears. When one night a hook lodged not in a bag of flour but in the clothing of an Indian soldier, whose bleeding body fell at their feet, the *Ma'dan* feared reprisals, and allowed the trains to pass unpilfered for a time. Later the grappling hooks came out again, but when they found the trucks covered with nets of stout rope, the Arabs confessed defeat, and turned their attention once more to the river.

Haji Rikkan, regarding them as martial exploits and therefore to be avoided, took no part in these raids. He did, however, find a real opening for his talents. To quote his own words, "In those days many persons found themselves in possession of goods for which they had no use; these I bartered to such as had need of them."

It was an odd freak of chance which a few months later enlisted Haji Rikkan on the side

of the forces of order. The persistent raids, petty as was each separate attempt, had begun to cause real concern to the military authorities; ration and equipment reserves were at a dangerous minimum, and the army could not afford the smallest loss. The telegraph wires hummed, and the local political officers, now installed in the empty chairs of the Turkish mutasarrifs and qaimmaqams, were sharply called to task.

Thus it befell that Haji Rikkan, having one day left his *mashhuf* with its illicit load moored beside a date-garden a little below the town, walked confidently through the market at Qala't Salih. As once before in his career, he had grown bold through long immunity; but he felt uneasy as he observed a townsman pointing him out to one of the newly-recruited police, and heard him say, "That is Haji Rikkan."

"I call Allah to witness," said the Haji, "that this was the first time I had feared blame for helping others. The policeman took me by the arm, and saying that the Hakim wanted me, led me to the river bank. There I saw a *mashhuf* with its crew of four waiting, and beside it stood the Englishman talking to his sergeant of police. Our language was still strange and heavy upon his tongue, and as he talked I seized the

chance to address the Indian clerk who waited near. Telling him—Allah pardon me, it was a lie—that I had sent six chickens to his house, I asked what the Hakim wanted of me. In his soft weak Arabic he replied that the General was hot with anger against the Hakim because of the many thefts committed by the *Ma'dan;* that even now he was setting out to punish some thieves of the Bait Khafi who he had heard were at Abu Raml, only a few miles within the marsh; and that having heard of me as one who knew the waterways, he required me to go with him as guide.

"I saw the Hakim turn and call for me. By Allah's mercy it was the hour of prayer, and I gained a few moments in which to think. As I bent in prayer I spoke softly to one I knew that stood by, bidding him hasten to my cousins in the *mashhuf* and warn them that the Bait Khafi was in danger.

"*Allahu Akbar*—Most great is God!" exclaimed Haji Rikkan after a pause. "Behold me in the winking of an eye seated in the Hakim's *mashhuf,* his four men paddling swiftly downstream. I took comfort as we passed the date-garden, and I saw that my *mashhuf* was no longer there. My cousins knew of short cuts to

the *ishan* of Abu Raml; of these the Hakim's boatmen were ignorant, and was it for me to tell them?

"Darkness fell, but still we went on, travelling all night until we reached the village of Zichiya, where for two hours we slept. At earliest dawn Halshad, the chief *mashhufchi,* returned from the village where he had been to gather news, and in low tones spoke with the Hakim. From their dark looks I guessed what he had heard, for I knew that by this time the Bait Khafi must have fled from their island; but none the less the Hakim must needs go to Abu Raml. We set off as the sun rose, I poling while Halshad sat behind the Hakim with his loaded rifle.

"Standing in the prow as I was, I could see over the top of the rushes, and my heart rejoiced as we drew near the *ishan* and I beheld nothing but the bare framework of the reed houses. I knew that my message had been in time, and now surely I should be released from the post of guide.

"But I was too hopeful. 'To Umm Khayis,' said the Hakim shortly, without a word to me. This island was also a settlement of the Bait Khafi, but I dared not protest, for how could

I tell what Halshad had heard of me in the village overnight? My best plan seemed to gain what credit I could as a guide. That was a long journey, but the Hakim had picked good men who did not tire, and I also had to take my share of paddling and poling.

"The Bait Khafi, having retreated so far into the marsh, thought themselves secure, or were perhaps weary after their hasty flight. Umm al Khayis was surrounded by their boats and rafts of reed, but we reached the *ishan* without challenge. One small hut had been erected, and from it as I shouted their names came forth the headmen, looking blank and bewildered at sight of the Hakim thus appearing in a solitary *mashhuf*.

"He, looking round him with a fearless air, landed and walked to the hut. None made motion to stop him, but one of the men ran to a boat beached near by, and from beneath the piled-up household goods brought forth a carpet, which he spread in the hut. In silence the Hakim seated himself, and in silence the headmen stood before him, surprise and fear having driven from their tongues even the customary greetings. Outside the men of the tribe crowded together, speaking in hushed tones.

"Halshad—may he never thrive!—now entered the hut, wearing an English soldier's coat, and bearing in his hands other unfamiliar things which made the guilt of the Bait Khafi plain to all eyes.

"Then the Hakim addressed the four headmen.

" 'It is not hidden from you that the great British Government wishes all her people to live in peace and quietness. Robbery and stealing are forbidden, yet the Bait Khafi are well known as robbers and thieves.'

"Mahawi was the first of the headmen to find words to his tongue. 'Hakim,' he replied, 'May Allah lengthen thy years! Some enemy of ours has brought thee lying tales. We are marsh-dwellers, busy watching our buffaloes and weaving our mats. How could we rob from the Great Government?'

"The crowd outside, pressing against the sides of the hut to hear what was said, murmured in agreement. But the Hakim drew from his pocket a piece of paper, and in loud tones read out a list of the things which had been stolen from a steamboat two nights before.

"Now to me, who had lived outside the marshes, the marvel of the telegraph was well

known; but to the Bait Khafi it seemed a miracle.

"'By Allah,' they exclaimed, 'he knows all. Nothing is hidden from him. May Allah protect Lafta and Barbuti!'

"Mahawi, frowning in anger, called to the people to be silent. But his words were too late: the Hakim had good ears.

"'Before I leave this place,' said he in a stern voice, 'Lafta and Barbuti must be brought before me.'

"At this the people were silent, consternation filling their hearts; then they broke into hurried speech, the craven-hearted urging obedience, the bolder-spirited protesting. At length amid much shouting they withdrew apart to discuss what they had best do.

"I was now able to speak a few words to Mahawi, explaining to him my presence with the Hakim.

"'How many soldiers has he brought? We can see none,' the headman muttered.

"'Would one man come alone to the heart of the marsh, holding his life in his hand?' I scoffed, for I was afraid to tell him the truth. The death of this Englishman, I thought, might well be laid to my account.

"Mahawi, a man of known cunning, now tried to move the Hakim to compassion. He brought in two young boys, saying, 'Here are Lafta and Barbuti, who in their childish folly have robbed from the great and merciful government.'

"But the Hakim, rising in swift anger, pulled Mahawi to the ground by his beard, and bidding Fadhal his *mashhufchi* shoot him if he tried to rise, loudly bade the people bring in the true culprits. And the Bait Khafi, silent and fearful because they believed that never would the Englishman dare to insult a man's beard unless he had many hundred troops near by, produced them.

"Questioned by the Hakim, Lafta and Barbuti confessed their guilt. But when he ordered his men to tie them to the framework of the hut for a punishment of thirty lashes, the tribesmen's faces grew dark. Courage returned to the hearts of all when they thought that their kinsmen's blood was to be shed. As for me, I cursed all infidels and their religion and the rash boldness which had brought me into danger; for it seemed impossible that we should escape with our lives. As I looked out from the hut, beyond the threatening figures of the marsh-

men I could see the reeds waving, and here and there among the reeds was the glint of a rifle.

"'Hakim,' I whispered, 'we are surrounded. Unless these two thieves be released, we are lost.'

"But he paid no heed, except to order Mahawi to sit beside him, so that none dare fire at him for fear of wounding their headman. And as we sat there, awaiting what fate had decreed, we heard a sound of running feet. Into the hut, tearing off their *chafiyas* as they ran, came the headmen. They fell on their knees before the Hakim, kissing his hands and feet, and crying *'Dakhilak, dakhilak!'* And when I heard that, I knew that their fear had prevailed, so that they hastened to make submission—aye, and to ask protection. We were saved.

"The Hakim was now able to impose his own terms. For the things which the Bait Khafi had stolen from the ship, he demanded five times their value; the punishment of flogging would be forgone, if the tribe handed over ten rifles; and as a mark of submission the four headmen must themselves paddle him back to the river. Seeing their reluctance at this last condition, the Hakim gave his word that they should return in safety.

"Amid much shouting the fine was collected, and the homeward journey began. As we went I found occasion to ask one of the headmen why they had thus suddenly made *dakhala* to the Hakim.

" 'We knew well,' he replied, 'that one man would not come alone against us; so when through the reeds we saw the gleam of his soldiers' rifles, we became afraid for our lives and the lives of our children.'

"At these words I laughed in my beard, for I knew that none had been with the Hakim save myself and his four *mashhufchis*.

"We reached and crossed the river, and the Hakim ordered a great fire to be made. As the flames rose high in the air, a loud wailing arose from the reeds on the other bank. It was the headmen's women, who, fearful of their fate and trusting not to the Hakim's word, had followed us; when they saw the fire, they thought that their menfolk were to be burned alive.

"When this was explained to the Hakim, he laughed a great laugh, so that no man was in fear of his life. Seizing the rifles, he flung them on the fire; then taking the *chafiya* in which the money was tied from the man who carried

it, he threw the five hundred rupees into the river.

"As Allah is exalted," exclaimed Haji Rikkan, "of all the things the Hakim had done, none caused greater wonder than that. He flung five hundred rupees into the river! Then he bade the marshmen return to their homes. And as they kissed his hand at parting, the oldest of them muttered low, 'After what we have seen to-day, we shall rob no more; for of this government we are afraid!'

"To please the Hakim, when we had reached the town once more, I said to him, *'Ma sh' Allah,* never before have I seen one man defy a whole tribe!'

" 'Fool,' he replied, 'they were not afraid of me, but of the British Government.'

"Nevertheless," ended the Haji, looking at me slyly, "it was not I but the Hakim who was the fool. For the Bait Khafi were afraid not of him, nor of the British Government, but of their own cousins, the glint of whose rifles they saw in the reeds."

"Perhaps both they and thou saw only what the eyes feared to see," I suggested.

"The All-Powerful alone knows," ejaculated Haji Rikkan piously, but without conviction.

Chapter VIII

THE FLAG OF 'ABBAS

SHORTLY after this exploit, another summons came to Haji Rikkan, and the decision he had to make was not an easy one. Should he become official marsh guide to the Political Officer? He turned the pros and cons over in his mind. The merit he had acquired as a Haji would mitigate the stigma of serving an infidel government; the dangers of the post would be compensated by the rewards, for surely one who threw into the river wealth which he might have put in his own pocket would prove a generous paymaster! On the other hand, the Turks might return with greater forces, and drive the unbelieving English into the sea; but this seemed to the Haji, for the present at any rate, unlikely. In the end he decided that the new opening offered better opportunities for his talents than the profession of "fence." His judgement was vindicated when later, as will be related in its place, he obtained the lucrative post of Chicken

Contractor to the Army of Occupation, which in its turn led to his present trade of peddling grocer. In the meantime it was with great relief that he learned of the transfer of the "Hot Hakim," of whose rash and airy adventures he had thoroughly disapproved.

The new Political Officer, he told me, was a man of very different stamp, "small of body but great in guile." While continuing his predecessor's policy of suppressing the habitual raiding of the *Ma'dan,* he achieved success by different methods. The Haji, whose timorous nature ever chose the paths of peace, was loud in his praise of a diplomacy which was as effective as force could have been in stamping out robbery.

"Hardly will my words be believed," he said, "but by thy head—and thou art dearer to me than a brother—I speak truth. Hast ever dreamed that a woman and a madman could do the work of sword and rifle? Never; yet the Hakim brought about no less."

The first step of the new Political Officer had been to provide himself with transport with which the marsh Arabs could not compete. From the mass of river craft which was hurried out from home—though too late—to repair the

army's serious shortage on the Tigris, he obtained a launch of shallow draught. Small as she was, she could carry enough armed men to secure her from attack or ambush, and her speed gave her an advantage over all the craft of the marshes.

One day, as the little launch, with Haji Rikkan on board as guide, made her way down a long, reed-bordered channel, a *birkash* was seen to enter at the far end. No sooner did its occupants see the launch than they seized their rifles, jumped from the boat into the shallow water, and dashed into the shelter of the reeds, through which they could be heard pushing and crashing their way. The sudden flight was suspicious; the *Ma'dan* usually gazed in open-mouthed astonishment at the strange self-propelled craft. The abandoned boat was therefore drawn up to the launch and examined. It was loaded innocently enough with reeds; but when the bundles were pulled aside, half a dozen stout poles were disclosed.

Here was a clue to the mystery of a daring exploit. Although navigation on the Narrows below 'Amara, difficult enough by day, was almost impossible in darkness, the ships provisioning the army could not be allowed to rest. The

Narrows were therefore lit up by electricity, the lamps being supported on poles set at intervals along the river bank. One night a long gap was observed in the line of brilliant lights; and the wireman sent out to investigate returned with the news that ten poles had been uprooted and carried off, almost under the eyes of the garrison at the control post.

The boat with its illicit load was taken in tow, and the launch went on her way. At the first marsh Arab encampment the Political Officer landed. The village seemed almost deserted; not a man was to be seen; only a few gaping women stared at the launch.

"But as we landed," said Haji Rikkan, "another woman came from one of the reed houses. It was Awasha, wife of the headman Salim. '*Bismillah,* enter,' she said to the Hakim, and led him to her house, where she began to make tea.

"While the kettle was yet on the fire a young girl entered, and whispered in Awasha's ear. The Hakim heard not what she said, but I who sat near heard her words: she had seen that the *birkash* brought by us was that of Sa'id and Habib, men of their village, and she feared for their safety.

"Awasha made no reply, yet as she washed the glasses for tea I saw that her hands trembled. Till we had quenched our thirst she said nothing; and then, rising, she led the Hakim to the far end of the hut, where slept a small infant in its cradle.

" 'New,' she said, and I wondered much that a mother's pride should prevail at this time of danger. Then I saw that she did but dally with the child until she might devise a plan to save her village from the Hakim's wrath. So long they stayed beside the cradle that the Hakim thought she required of him a *dilla',* or birth-gift; and removing the *chafiya* which he wore not upon his head but round his neck, he gave it to her for the child.

"She, delighted, ran with it to the doorway, there in the light to gaze upon its bright colours. And as she marvelled at it, holding it first close before her eyes, then at a distance, she whispered to me, 'What of Sa'id?'

" '*Salim*—safe,' I replied.

" 'And of Habib?'

" '*Salim,*' I answered again.

" 'What is this talk of Salim?' asked the Hakim, who had followed Awasha to the door.

"'I speak of Salim my husband, headman of this *bait,*' replied she with her ready woman-wit.

"'Where is he?'

"'Gone to do my bidding.'

"'And what is thy bidding?' he asked.

"'Rest, and I will tell thee.'

"So the Hakim seated himself on the carpet made ready, while Awasha stood before him, still fondling the shining square of silk.

"'Speak,' he ordered.

"And crouching on the ground she spoke in low tones.

"'The men of this *bait* are poor creatures. I am but a woman, yet I drive them like cattle.'

"'I see that thou hast driven them from the village. Answer me, why is there not a man to be found here to-day?'

"'They have gone to do my bidding,' said Awasha.

"'So thou hast already said; what is thy bidding?' But Awasha remained silent, fearing to speak.

"'Tell me,' the Hakim ordered sternly.

"'If I tell, shall I have thy protection?'

"'Thou art protected,' he said.

"'Have I *hadh wa bakht*—word of honour that I come to no hurt?'

" 'Yes, *hadh wa bakht.*'

" 'They have gone to steal,' at length confessed the woman.

" 'Then,' said the Hakim, 'it was they who stole the poles?'

"Awasha nodded, adding, 'Have I not thy word of honour?'

"For a time there was silence in the house. The woman sat watching the face of the all-powerful Hakim, whose wrath she had braved; but what she saw emboldened her spirit, for presently she drew nearer him, saying in a voice soft and caressing,

" 'Hakim, I say to the men of this *bait,* "Rob," and they rob; I say, "Steal not," and they do not steal. And if to every child I bring forth thine Excellency wilt give a *dilla',* such as this one'—she held up the *chafiya*—'then I will say, "Steal not."'

"At this the Hakim laughed; but he promised what she asked.

"Twice a son was born to her, and each time she received from him the birth-gift of silk. But for the third child there was no *dilla',* for he had gone.

"W'Allah, the folly of women!" concluded Haji Rikkan in a tone of disgust, throwing up

his hands. "That her children might be honoured above the children of others, she sacrificed all that her tribe might have gained by theft. That was silk dearly bought, yet she thought the price worth while."

Evidently the bargain had satisfied Awasha; it must have been even more satisfactory to the Political Officer. But I wondered if the three little urchins, bedecked in the gay stripes of his scarf, were as unpopular with their naked little contemporaries as was Joseph of old in his coat of many colours!

Haji Rikkan went on to tell me of Miskail, an old marshman who, though he had been passed over as headman of the Bait Yasin because of his straying wits, was none the less employed by the Political Officer in his campaign against the raiders.

"A grown man with a full white beard," said the Haji, "he yet preferred to choose young children as his companions. All day he would play with them, and never was he seen without a troop of careless urchins at his heels. Some waggish spirit, seeing him thus at the head of his troop, had dubbed him the Bimbashi—the Major—and by this name he was known throughout the marshes.

"Now it chanced that the Bimbashi had heard of the good government of the English, and of the present which the Hakim had made and promised yearly to Awasha; and in his wandering mind he conceived a plan at which the Bait Yasin, when they heard it, laughed in scorn, thinking it but another of his wayward notions. Nevertheless he contrived to have speech with the Hakim.

"'I told him,' he said to the village on his return, 'what do these boys from sunrise to sunset, aye, and even during the night no less? Are they not ever in mischief, learning to be thieves even as their fathers are? And while they play, the raiders of river boats creep silently through the reeds, and lie in wait by the water's edge. Only by setting a good watch, I said, can thine Excellency prevent this; and what eyes are keener than the eyes of youth? I can place at thy service a hundred pairs of sharp eyes—eyes, too, that since they first opened on the world have been accustomed to gaze at reeds and rushes and glinting water.'"

In the end the Bimbashi's arguments prevailed, and he returned to his village triumphant, a bag of tobacco in his hand. And his boast proved to be no idle one. The small boys of

the marshes flocked to his banner; in a body, naked as the day they were born, they would run behind the Bimbashi up and down the stretch of river which they had been set to guard, chanting a war-cry in their high treble voices. "We have seen the *mashhuf* of Shabib the thief!" they would cry over and over again in unison, or "What does Mardi

Among the *bardi?*"

With their proximity thus publicly announced, what wonder that would-be thieves kept clear of the reach between Hamdan and Gurmat Sharji?

Sometimes the Political Officer's launch would appear on the river. Then the youthful watchmen would keep pace with it along the bank, shouting, "We are the eyes of the high Wali!" At their head would run Miskail, his cloak flying behind him, the *kafiya* which should have been on his head brandished aloft as though it had been a mace or double-headed axe, while his deep voice set the refrain for his band of enthusiasts.

When voices died away and footsteps lagged —for it is hard work to keep pace with a launch —the Bimbashi would turn on his little followers, waving his arms in a frenzy, stamping his

feet in time to the song, and shouting it still more loudly. Thus encouraged, the shrill voices would once more take up the chant, and the thin brown legs make heroic efforts to keep up with their indefatigable leader.

Sometimes—so the Haji told me—the launch would be stopped, and proudly reporting that no thefts had taken place in his reach of the river, Miskail would receive the congratulations of the Political Officer. At first he was elated, even inordinately proud; but as time passed he began to be doubtful. It was impossible, he seemed to think, that he could be a success in life at last; might it not be that thefts were taking place of which he did not hear? But his puzzled old brain was not to fret long over the problem. One evening, in the gathering dusk, the crew of an up-going boat mistook his patrol of watchers for a marauding band, and opened fire. Miskail was killed, shot through the head, and his "battalion" dispersed, never to come together again.

As time went by the river raids diminished, slowly but surely, and at length ceased. Haji Rikkan admitted that the efforts of the local Political Officers did something towards the attainment of this end, but he was not prepared

to concede that it was entirely due to them; this, in fact, he hotly denied. No, to a supernatural agency must the success of the British policy be chiefly attributed; the credit was undoubtedly due to 'Abbas, Father of the Hot Head, who, though only great-nephew of the Prophet, seems to hold a higher place in the hagiology of the *Ma'dan* than Mohammad himself.

In the course of one of the war-time exploits of the marshmen, a young man named Musa was wounded. Preferring the familiar river to the unknown terrors of captivity, he jumped from the ship he had boarded, but found himself unable to swim. A British soldier, seeing his plight, dived in and rescued him. Musa was taken to the Civil Hospital at 'Amara, where he made a good recovery; but his tribe, thinking that he was only being saved for a hanging, sent his mother to intercede for his life with the Political Officer.

This was the same official of whose craft and subtlety Haji Rikkan had so high an opinion; and he did not fail to live up to his reputation by making full use of this small pawn. Back went the wailing old marshwoman to her tribe with his ultimatum: the lad's life should be spared and he should be sent back to his village

unscathed, as soon as the headmen had sworn a solemn oath, by the Flag of 'Abbas, to raid no more.

The tribesmen, gathered in conclave, hesitated. They were being asked to take the most binding of all oaths. 'Abbas, son of 'Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law and nephew, by a Bedouin woman, he who according to tradition lost both arms and finally his life in an endeavour to fetch water for Husain's hapless band on the fatal day of Karbala, is known among the tribes as *Abu'l Ras al Harr,* the Father of the Hot Head, and is famed for the swiftness of his vengeance. An oath sworn by 'Abbas is one the marsh Arab fears to break, lest some dire calamity should fall speedily on himself or on his family.

The Bait Naggar agreed at length to take the oath. It must have been their uneasy consciences which made them suspect a trap in the Hakim's proposal to meet them at the edge of the marsh. Swear they would, since a valued life was at stake; but leave the shelter of the marshes—never. Messages were sent in, and in the end it was decided that a *mashhuf* with two men of the tribe should be sent to the edge of

the marsh, where the Hakim, with Haji Rikkan in attendance, was ready to meet them.

"Knowing the Bait Naggar as I did," said Haji Rikkan, "I was prepared to find them fail in their promise. But when we reached the appointed place, there we found the old man 'Ali with his cousin Hasan, awaiting us.

"It was a day of strong and bitter wind. Even in the shelter of the narrowest channels the wind found us, and drove the *mashhuf* into the reeds; and when we came out into the open spaces, the waves were whipped up by the gale until they beat against the sides of our boat, spraying us with water. For an hour we battled against it; then 'Ali, who was an old man and feeble, stayed in the lee of a high clump of *shabab,* that he might rest awhile. And as we waited Hasan, who feared naught, began to hold converse with the Hakim.

" 'These tribes, O Hakim, deserve a heavy punishment for bringing thee into the marshes on so inclement a day.'

" 'True indeed,' swore the Hakim, with an English oath.

" 'Many times have I told them,' went on Hasan, 'of the power and greatness of the British Government, and have foretold the punishment

which would surely come upon them; but they would not listen to my words. Verily, these madmen who persist in robbery and theft, when they might betake themselves to a life of peace under the protection of the Great Government, resemble in stupidity the buffaloes among which they live.'

"'Ali was not best pleased with these words of his young cousin, and though not yet rested took up his pole to begin once more the battle with the wind. Thus Hasan had no more time for speech with the Hakim, until we reached the village of the Bait Naggar. On the largest *ishan* was the house of Khasib, chief headman of the tribe, and in it were gathered all the elders.

"When the Hakim was seated, Khasib—*W'Allah,* father of cunning was he!—began to address the tribesmen. Clearly, often repeating his words that the slowest-witted might understand, he explained the reason of the Hakim's coming: they must swear by the Flag of 'Abbas that they would steal no more, and in return the boy Musa would be handed back to the tribe.

"Now this is the manner of tying the Flag of 'Abbas. Khasib rose to his feet, and clearing a space in the midst of the hut, called for one to bring a *gusba.* Hastily a long reed was

brought, and from this he broke off a piece the length of a man's body. Laying it on the ground, he said in loud tones,

" 'This is the sword of 'Abbas, of *Abu'l Ras al Harr.*' Then, looking round on those present and seeing one wearing a garment of white stuff, he cried, ' 'Ubaid son of Machaifad, bring hither thy *disdasha.*'

"The man obeyed, laying the garment down beside the reed.

"Then Khasib cried, 'This is the flag of Allah, of Mohammad his Prophet, and of 'Ali, and its avenger is 'Abbas. This flag is on me, on my eyes and on my life, on my brothers and on my kindred. Nothing is concealed nor hidden, and its avenger is 'Abbas.' With these words he tied a corner of the *disdaha* round the reed.

"In turn stepped forward the other three headmen, each in his turn to tie a knot, saying aloud as he did so, 'I tie this flag on me, on my brothers and on my kindred.'

"Thus was the most binding of all oaths sworn, and all should have been satisfied; yet still the headmen lingered uneasily beside the knots they had tied. Then they began to murmur that it was no light matter thus to swear on behalf of

a whole *bait;* if the bolder spirits held not their hands from stealing, 'Abbas would revenge himself not on them, but on the headmen who had sworn the oath. Let these others, then, swear also! Let them tie the flag on their own heads, that the minds of the headmen might be at rest.

"But the thieves feared to come forward in the presence of the Hakim, until at last the aged Khasib began to call their names aloud. Then they saw that concealment was no longer possible, and albeit unwillingly they began to tie the knot each on his own behalf.

"The name of one man, Sulman bin Daud, was called many times, yet would he not enter the house. 'I have an only son,' he said, 'I fear the vengeance of 'Abbas.'

" 'Steal no more, and thy son will be safe,' urged the headmen; but Sulman still held back, until at length, persuaded by the rest, he rushed into the hut among a group of noted thieves who, emboldened by their numbers, determined to swear together. And, by Allah—Be He exalted! —there in their midst was the young Hasan, who on our journey of the morning had vaunted his righteousness to the Hakim!

"When all had sworn, the Hakim gave to Khasib, in whose house the Flag of 'Abbas had

been tied, the customary *chiswa* or gift of clothing. Then he entered his *mashhuf,* and we left for the river; and as we left, the Hakim said:

"'*In sh' Allah,* they will steal no more.'

"'Please God,' I replied, though with but faint hope, for the Bait Naggar was known to me of old. And I was right, for no sooner was the boy Musa restored to them than they returned to their thievish ways. 'An oath forced upon us by an unbeliever is not binding,' they said. But 'Abbas thought otherwise.

"For the Bait Naggar was at blood-feud with the Bait Yasin, and within a few days of the Hakim's visit the truce between them ceased, nor would they renew it, for their blood was hot. And when they attacked, they knew not that the Bait Yasin, after the manner of the English soldiers, had dug ditches for the protection of their bodies. Thus the Bait Naggar suffered heavily, losing twelve lives; and of these twelve, four—I swear it by Allah and by the life of thy head!—four were the same four headmen who had tied the Flag. 'Abbas, Father of the Hot Head, had taken his revenge.

"When this became known to the marsh tribes, they knew that 'Abbas was angry, and would no longer look favourably on the robbing

of river boats. And from that day the raids ceased."

With this supernatural assistance, then, the work of the local political officers was achieved, and Haji Rikkan's services as marsh guide were no longer in such constant demand. He cast round for a new occupation, and by making the most of his "political" services managed to secure from the Local Purchase Officer one of the many contracts for supplying eggs and chickens to the military hospitals at 'Amara. Travelling from village to village with a small stock of such luxuries as sugar, matches, and oil, he bartered them to the simple marsh-people, whose wildest dreams would not have guessed the profits made by him on their tough and skinny fowls.

With the end of the War the Haji's contract also came to an end, and he became the mere peddling grocer I first knew. Many a time he mourned aloud over the difference between the pitiful present and those days of harvest.

"In those times," he would say, "the British poured out gold as a man pours grain out of a sack. Where are those days, and where are these? Then there was money for all, and no man lacked for aught. But the English went back to their own country and though they took

not their gold with them, it has all followed after them. In all 'Iraq now, from the east to the west, there is no money. Even the government itself is penniless, and takes from us what little we have left. *W'Allahi,* I am alive for this reason only, that I am too poor to pay for my funeral!"

So lamented Haji Rikkan, who in that golden age of contractors had begun to realize his dreams of wealth. His profits were enormous, and were much enhanced by a stratagem of which he was inordinately proud—though it was still a grievance that in guile he had been easily outstripped by a Jewish competitor.

The Haji's chickens were sold by weight, the English sergeant fixing an average price by the weight of the first dozen taken at random from the cage of date-sticks in which they were brought in. Haji Rikkan, observing this unvarying procedure, scoured the marshes high and low for the largest fowls he could find, and these he put in the first cage offered to the sergeant. By being careful always to produce more chickens than were required, he always had two or three cages to take back, and a little inconspicuous juggling ensured that one of these contained his prize birds. Each week the same plump

fowls were weighed, and accepted as fair representatives of their scraggy companions; and each week the Haji's profits were gratifyingly high.

Nevertheless, even after the lapse of ten years Haji Rikkan could not forgive Yusif the Jew for having profited by a trick which, if unoriginal, was financially more successful than his own.

"I will tell thee, one thing he did. Couldst thou make a man pay one rupee ten annas for a *hugga* of water, when a great river ran past his house, when the country round was one wide marsh, nay, when he had but to turn a handle, and water would gush from an iron pipe? Yet this is what Yusif did. He was the contractor for meat, driving in sheep and cows to the camp. And before he brought them to the sergeant to be weighed, he would keep them for two days without water, or for three days if the weather were not hot; then he would take them to the river and let them drink their fill. And for the great quantity of water in their bellies he was paid at the rate of one rupee ten annas the *hugga!* Allah the All-Powerful, that such things could be! Any Turkish soldier would have seen through the trick, but not so the Englishman. Now which serves his government the

better, the Turk who haggles all day over the price, and having bought cheap, charges a higher sum in his books; or the English soldier who makes for himself nothing, but pays a high price in money not his own?"

Those distant times, which to Haji Rikkan and his kind were not grim days of war but halcyon days of gain, came to an end all too soon. The ships which, loaded with men and stores, had forged slowly upstream, to return hastily for another cargo, now bore their heavy loads downstream, and returned empty. Rapidly their numbers dwindled, until the little children in the riverside villages ran to the bank to gaze at the monster boats which to their seniors of a few years had been so common a sight that hardly a head was raised to watch their passing. The trains ceased to run, and it was not long before the "iron road" was torn up and taken away. The white tents of the military posts were struck, and the barbed-wire entanglements, erected not so much for protection against enemy attacks as to secure immunity, rarely gained, from Arab marauders, were pulled down or abandoned. No longer were the Narrows lit up by electric light; even the tall poles were carried away. The buildings of the

river control stations were put up to auction, and the neat gardens so carefully tended by the old naval ratings who manned them were swiftly obliterated by the fast-growing camel-thorn. In a few short months the region known to Haji Rikkan showed not a trace of the British Occupation. Of all the power and might of an invading Empire no sign remained, save on the right bank of the Tigris between Kassara and Mantaris, where, too heavy to be broken up and carried off by the marsh Arabs, lay the rusted iron plates of the Turkish gunboat Marmoris, sunk after the battle of Qurna by the guns of H.M. Sloop Clio.

Chapter IX

IN FAVOUR OF DISCRETION

ALLAH loose me from this woman!" muttered Haji Rikkan angrily, for he was convinced that his wife made unlawful and surreptitious raids upon his stock in trade, in consequence of which we were now on our way to Musa'ida, one of the little towns in the rice country, there to replenish his depleted wares. This was an errand far less to the Haji's liking than a profitable day's bartering among the *Ma'dan;* but as we left the marsh and came to the great rice-fields which fringe its edge, his ill-humour began to evaporate, and he became once more his cheerful, loquacious self.

We passed slowly up one of the "tails" of the Chahala canal, which every year at flood time carries a load of rich silt to the rice-lands on either side, and leaving the narrow distributary comes out into the broad channel of the 'Adil. Here the current was strong, and paddling became hard work; at a word from Bahalul the

brothers leapt out on the bank with a coil of rope, looped themselves together so quickly that the *birkash* lost almost no way at all, and began to tow her at a steady, swinging pace. Haji Rikkan left his place in the "belly" of the boat, took up a paddle, and sat down in the stern to steer.

On each side of the river the cultivators, knee-deep in brown oozy mud, were busy. Strings of women passed to and fro, carrying on their heads baskets of young green rice-shoots, to be planted one by one by their menfolk in the newly-prepared silt beds. The rice-fields stretched for miles on either hand. Occasionally we passed a small garden of date palms, the trees heavily hung with their bunches of green fruit. A large *danak,* low in the water, sailed slowly past with a load of chattering women and children, on their way perhaps to visit the shrine of some local saint. In the infrequent villages, with their reed huts rounded like the haystacks of southern Cornwall, only women were to be seen, for all the men were at work among the rice. The bright colours of their dresses—scarlet is the favourite—showed up the good looks and graceful carriage which are so marked among the Albu Mohammad women; their large dark eyes and rounded features were over-hung by a heavy

fringe of hair, and silver anklets drew attention to their neat and shapely bare feet. Most of the house-walls were patterned with round flat dung-cakes, to be used as fuel when dried by the sun. Great piles of yellow rice-straw were carelessly stacked in open spaces here and there; a soft blur of brown and dun-colour meant cattle resting in the shade of a hut; the moored *mashhufs* were black against the sparkling water. In every village the fierce, shaggy dogs would run snarling and barking at the heels of Bahalul and Jahalul as we passed their masters' huts, until the end of their self-appointed beat was reached, or else would shrink whimpering away from the upraised reed with which some naked urchin threatened them.

As with lazy skill Haji Rikkan guided his boat on her way, he struck up a droning song, of which the words by very frequency of repetition at length became intelligible to me.

"Two gowns has she, and yet a third of red;
So sheer are they that through
Their folds I yet can see her waist's tattooed
Broad band of blue.

"Ah! were her father friendly to my suit,
I'd hasten to her side;
Gladly I'd sweep her hearth, nor think abased
My manly pride."

He caught my eye upon him, smiled broadly and self-consciously, and took me into his confidence.

"I sing of one that is a pearl indeed," he said. "I bear witness by Allah that she is a pearl, a houri. Her cheeks are like young melons, her mouth is a jewelled ring, no bigger; her teeth are sugar. Are not her eyes, *ma sh'Allah!* as big as eggs? And as for her breasts, they are like two Persian apples!"

Somewhat surprised at this outburst—for that the Haji was not yet too old to fall in love had never occurred to me—I said nothing.

"Dear as my house!" he called encouragingly to his nephews on the bank; and they obediently bent their backs to the rope, and broke into a jog-trot which sent our boat surging through the water.

"To-night," went on the Haji, turning to me," "we shall reach the house of 'Ulaiwi bin Jasim, father of Riyasa whom I desire. *W'Allahi,* to-day our journeying is fortunate!"

I agreed, for to me all care-free, indolent days spent in the Haji's *birkash* were fortunate.

"But as for thee," he added, with the thoughtful friendliness which never failed, "I shall not neglect thee when I hasten to her house. No, thee I will lead first to the dwelling of Makia,

the woman shaikh whose lands we are even now entering—that same Makia who led the Albu Mohammad when the Bani Lām were broken at Safaiha. She shall give thee hospitality to-night—Ach! the Omnipotent!—" he broke off to exclaim, as the boat, its guidance forgotten as he talked, bumped violently into the bank.

The *birkash* once more under way, Haji Rikkan fell silent. I thought his expression unusually gloomy, especially after the rhapsodies of a few minutes earlier.

"What ails?" I asked.

The Haji was glad to unburden his mind. "It is not hidden from thee," he said, "that her cousin has the first right to take a woman in marriage. Even though she love another, he may take her by force; aye, and even if he desires not to wed her, he may forbid another's taking her. And if another man, greatly desiring her, weds the woman regardless of her cousin, then by our law the cousin has the right to kill that man. Now Riyasa, whom I love, has a cousin that desires to wed her. Shall I then take her, and perhaps be slain? Can she comfort me in my grave?

"I know not whether she desires me; yet why should she not? My beard is no longer grey,

but black with henna and *wasma*: for two *krans* spent I am become a young man. Yet I fear to take her without the consent of her cousin. Since last thou didst honour us, Hadaiyat Effendi of 'Amara, whom thou knowest well, has died a sudden death. If one so great as he can be killed for a woman, what of a peddler of the *Ma'dan?* If thou hast not yet heard the story, I will tell thee how he died."

I remembered Hadaiyat Effendi well. Like others who had enjoyed his feasts and his shooting parties, I had subscribed to the general opinion that our lavish and genial host was a sportsman and good fellow; but as soon as he was dead and tongues might wag without danger, a different story was told. Usurer, taskmaster, and oppressor, wine-bibbing companion of infidels—these are hard names, but they were freely applied to the effendi by the very townspeople who had been proud to be called his friends; and still more odious titles were used by the tillers of his fields.

Hadaiyat Effendi was one of the few big private land-owners in the district. Rumour had it that his father had been merely a dishonest clerk in the Land Registry, who in Turkish times had succeeded in granting himself the

large tract of land which had made his son rich and powerful. He lived neither in tent nor in reed hut, but in a large brick-built house on the bank of the Tigris.

The news that Hadaiyat Effendi had been murdered reached the town, the Haji told me, at dawn one summer morning. Eagerly it was discussed in market and coffee-shop, and by the river bank where the shrill-voiced women filled their water-pots. Then more details began to be passed from mouth to mouth: not only was the effendi dead, but the bodies of a woman and another man had also been found. The town was agog with excitement; the rumoured death-roll grew hourly longer; and not until the next day did the true story become known.

About midnight, the watchmen had heard a sudden scream from the room in which Hadaiyat Effendi was sleeping with the young wife newly added to his *harim*—"a foal among she-camels," said Haji Rikkan. They rushed in, to find their master dying on the ground. Some mounted, and set off in hot pursuit of the murderer, the hoofs of whose horse could be heard drumming in the distance. After a long chase in the darkness they came up with the galloping horse, only to find it riderless. As they returned to

the house, just after dawn, they were hailed by a group of cultivators gathered in excited discussion round two motionless figures—the dead body of a woman, and the limp unconscious form of a young man.

The woman's body was at once carried to the house, for the returning servants recognized it as that of Fitna, Hadaiyat's fifteen-year-old wife, bride of a few days. The wounded man was carried in to the town hospital, but not before he had been identified as 'Ali bin Guhait, a member of a sheep-owning tribe, and first cousin to Fitna.

This relationship explained the murder of Hadaiyat Effendi. In defiance of tribal custom he had married Fitna, knowing that by right of cousinship she belonged to 'Ali bin Guhait; and 'Ali, accepting the obligations of his tribal code, had killed the man who had thus brushed aside the social custom of centuries. What remained unexplained was the murder of the girl. There was ample testimony that she had married Hadaiyat unwillingly; moreover, tribal custom in such cases attributes no blame to the woman, who is but bestowed, unconsulted, by her father. 'Ali's act seemed to be the wanton cruelty of a jealous lover.

The truth was heard only by the English doctor, and by Majid the hospital attendant, from whose lips Haji Rikkan had the story. It seemed that the murderer, a young shepherd about twenty years of age, had begged the doctor to let him die in the open, not within the confinement of four walls; and the doctor had assented. 'Ali was carried out into the open fields to spend his last few hours under the sky, Majid being left in charge.

All day 'Ali bin Guhait lay silent as though asleep, until at sunset the doctor came out to see him. Then he roused from his torpor, and lifting himself on his elbow gathered together all his forces for a passionate indictment of the man who had caused his death. In stern and measured words he made his protest.

"The rich man has flocks beyond count, and he does not know the number of his horses. He eats his fill of flesh every day, and clothes his body in silk raiment. The arms and feet of his wives are loaded with ornaments of gold, his tents are filled with servants. He knows neither hunger nor thirst, he has shelter from the winter winds and from the sun of summer. All his desires he has, yet lacks one thing in that he has no compassion. He cares not that the poor

man is robbed of his grain and of his cattle, nor pities him when his all is taken from him.

"For a man to lose his harvested corn is a matter of no account; to be robbed of his sheep is a small thing; but to be bereft of the wife who is his birth-right—that is a great matter, to be requited only by death. Now he is dead, and I also shall die before the sun sets; and to-night the rich man and the poor man shall be equal, for the jackals shall be scratching at both our graves."

Haji Rikkan paused, that this picture of man's ultimate equality might impress itself upon my mind. He had been speaking slowly, like a prophet of old denouncing the unrighteous; now he continued in the low and hurried tones of one who pleads his cause, of one who must speak while there is yet time. By such means did this untaught rhetorician give life and colour to his simplest words.

" 'Listen,' said 'Ali, 'and tell me if this is justice. It is the law of our fathers that a man's first cousin is his to take to wife, and none shall gainsay him. Now Fitna, daughter of Sagban, was my cousin, and my claim to her was twofold, by right and because she loved me even as I loved her. One day I heard that Sagban had

betrothed her to Hadaiyat Effendi. And when I went to him, he said, "May Allah blind me if I wish my daughter to wed this man! But the rains have failed, the crops are withered up, and I am deep in debt to Hadaiyat, as are all his cultivators. He has been pressing me to pay, and now he threatens to beat me, to burn my house and seize my cattle and my horse, unless I give him Fitna for his wife. The sum I owe is greater far than the value of my horse and the cattle which draw my plough. What could I do but say, Take my daughter?"

"'And I said to Sagban, "I have a rifle mounted with silver, a fleet mare, and a score of sheep. I will join these to thy horse and oxen, that thou mayst pay the effendi." He agreed, and we went together to the market; but the drought had caused many others to sell their beasts, and there was no price, so that the sum we brought back was not enough. None the less I took it to Hadaiyat, offering to work in his fields without payment until the full amount was earned; but he would not agree. And though I told him that the woman was mine by right, and though I warned him that if he wedded her he should surely die, he took my bride to wife.'"

The Haji paused, and there was a subtle

change in his voice when he again took up the tale.

"'Among all his servants passing to and fro,' said 'Ali, 'I found it easy to slip into his court-yard at dusk, and there was no warning bark when at midnight I made my way into the house and drove my dagger deep into his heart—so deep that I could not draw it out. Quickly I fled to where I had left my father's mare, and as I ran a figure followed me that, turning, I saw to be my cousin Fitna. So I mounted with her behind me, and we galloped out towards the desert; but a bullet struck me, and I fell to the ground. And as I lay there, Fitna came and lay in my arms, and all night I kissed her lips and her eyes and her slender neck.

"'Then as the darkness began to lighten I felt my cousin trembling in my arms. But when I said, "Take my cloak and wrap it round thee—the wind is ever chill at dawn," she answered, "Nay, I tremble not for cold, but because I fear death."

"' "Art also wounded unto death, even as I am?" I asked.

"' "Not wounded," she replied, "but when the sun rises I shall be found, and because I have lain all this night with thee I shall be killed.

Nay, whither should I flee? I know that there is no escape, and I must die. But if I died at thy hands, death would be easy."

" ' "How can I kill thee, I who love thee?" I asked. But she answered, "Wouldst rather then that I died in anguish at the hands of those who hate me? Ah, kill me now, and death will come as easily as sleep to the weary."

" 'And I said, "I have no weapon," whereupon she seized my hand and passionately kissed it, and laid it to her soft throat,'—she kissed the palm of his hand and laid it to her throat," Haji Rikkan repeated hoarsely, making me realize how compelling had been the girl's appeal for death.

"For a space," he concluded, " 'Ali bin Guhait lay silent and without motion, as though already dead. Then suddenly he raised himself, and with a great voice crying out, 'There is no justice for the poor man, but I have avenged the injustice,' he died."

Such was the tragic story, the remembrance of which caused Haji Rikkan to look back from the fresh plough of matrimony, to which he had barely yet put his hand. His Riyasa also had a first cousin. Was a woman worth the adding

of yet another to the many feuds to which he or his tribe was already a party? Was discretion perhaps the better part of love? Paddle in hand, he sat deeply pondering the question.

We reached the outskirts of Makia's village, at which we were to sleep that night.

"*Bismillah*—in the name of Allah!" cried the hospitable villagers as they recognized Haji Rikkan.

"The blessing of Allah," he flung back as we passed, and called to an acquaintance to warn Makia of our arrival.

We found her waiting on the river bank, surrounded by a crowd of followers. Greeting us gravely and with perfect ease, she led the way to her *madhif,* where tea and coffee were quickly brought. This woman shaikh, far from seeking the seclusion which by all the standards of her class is the right and proper protection of her sex, ruled her people and managed her affairs in unabashed publicity. As she sat opposite me in the *madhif,* consuming cigarette after cigarette in swift succession, it was clear even in the smoky gloom that she did not hold the allegiance of her tribe by reason of her beauty; she had only one eye, and must have been nearing sixty, by which time an Arab woman has long ceased

to consider her appearance. Nevertheless, her features were clear-cut and shrewd, and though her ample draperies were far from clean, her bearing marked her out as one accustomed to rule.

Her first abrupt words, after the conventional greetings, made me think my welcome not a very warm one.

"I dislike the English," she said in her harsh, unmodulated voice.

"Why?" I asked.

"Before they came I had thirteen slaves. Eleven ran away to the English, and I could not get them back. Is that not reason enough? But," she added unexpectedly, "perhaps those who have been seared with hot irons should not be blamed for flight!"

I watched Makia as she gave her orders, shouting curt instructions to this servant and that. Her mullah entered, whispered a few words in her ear, and received a quickly-muttered string of directions. A tribesman came hastily in, kissed her hand, and burst into a passionate complaint of ill-treatment, only to be waved away with an impatient shrug and shake of the head; another received a few abrupt words which sent him away calling down blessings on

her head. She behaved exactly as I had seen a score of shaikhs behave, and only her flowing black garments and swathed head-dress betrayed the fact that she was a woman.

"I also like the English," she began again, as abruptly as before. "Not because they are generous: generosity is easy for the rich; not because they are just: I would have the weak grow brave, and protect themselves. No, I like the English because they are powerful—stronger than the Arabs, and the Turks, and all the nations of the earth."

This seemed more friendly; but Makia relapsed again into a long silence, which she broke by asking if I would care to see her new *diwaniya*. This was a building of burnt brick—a matter of some pride in a village of reed huts—standing apart from the family quarters, and only used for the entertainment of guests. Rising to her feet, Makia led the way out of the *madhif*, her dress trailing in the dust behind her. The room into which she proudly conducted me boasted an unique scheme of decoration. High up round the walls ran a narrow shelf, on which were crowded together hundreds of pieces of crockery, European in pattern, and hideous in design. Soup tureens, cups and saucers, plates

and bowls, vegetable dishes—these were Makia's *objets d'art*. Below the shelf hung numbers of pictures, all highly coloured and some upside down: a portrait of Lord Roberts faced another of the Sultan, a glaring English 'Guardian Angel' was side by side with a group of the Turkish Parliament in session. Queen Victoria was foiled by an Arab print, devoid of perspective or proportion, showing the power of 'Ali over animals.

But Makia's greatest treasures were evidently in the next room. Here, on low broad shelves running round the wall, were stacks of silk-covered mattresses; beyond them the shelves held numbers of brightly-coloured pillows, hard and bolster-shaped, and across the end of the room were piled heavy silken padded quilts, each made in two colours, selected seemingly on the principle that they must either clash violently or contrast completely. All these possessions, the glory of Makia's establishment, were carefully folded, and most methodically arranged in order of merit: a pile of perfectly new and bright ones followed by a pile slightly worn, down to the oldest and shabbiest, which were meant presumably for the use of the servants of her guests.

So Makia had a feminine side after all! She waited eagerly for my praise of the number and richness of her cushions, though pretending unconcern.

"It would be a dishonour," she said, "if I could not provide every guest, whether rich or poor, with rest for his head and covering for his body."

It was twilight by the time this inspection was finished, and we returned to the *madhif* to await the evening meal. As the leaping flames lit up Makia's wrinkled face, I wondered if she had any other womanly feelings beside the housewife's pride she had just displayed—whether there had ever been a touch of romance in the life of this sallow, harsh-voiced, one-eyed ruler of a wild tribe.

"Eh w'Allah, I was beautiful once," she said, answering my thoughts, with a chuckle of satisfaction at my guilty start. "The daughter of Baddai was desired by many, but above all by Abu Risha, the great Abu Risha. He loved me for my beauty only," she added proudly, "for I could bring him nothing. My father was his enemy, and his tribe was angry that he should even wish to wed me.

"My father planned to give me in marriage

to Shaikh Kharraj, thus securing his help and friendship against Abu Risha. But I would none of it, though he threatened me with death. He was a hard ruler; men say I resemble him now." She laughed grimly.

"But one night his anger was fierce against me, and I feared that he would carry out his threat. So I did what no maiden should do: I summoned four of my negresses, I bade them get ready a *mashhuf,* and in the dead of night I slipped away from my father's village, and fled to my lover.

"I was wedded to Abu Risha the next morning. His tribesmen were hot with anger against him, though they hid their rage under much laughter at the boatload of women fleeing through the night. They could not forgive Abu Risha, who had set at naught the blood-feud between his tribe and mine, and they wished to kill him. But he was a great man, feared by all, and none could be found to undertake the deed.

"So those of his own people who hated him called other tribes to their help, and finally seven tribes agreed together to unite in killing him, that none might be alone responsible. They sent each a little powder, and each a little lead for the bullet, for they feared my vengeance and

the vengeance of those who were still loyal to Abu Risha.

"And at length, when he went to Al Dargan to collect his dues, while he was resting in the guest-house his enemies shot and killed him; one man held the rifle, and six others held the arm that pulled the trigger, that seven tribes might act together in the deed. They thought that none could avenge the dead on seven tribes."

"But he is avenged?" I asked.

"Aye, surely," replied Makia, her face hard and set in the firelight.

I ventured another question. "How?"

There was silence. Then the old woman's face slowly relaxed, and tears rolled down her withered cheeks.

"Ah, Abu Ṛisha," she wept, "thou art still unavenged. I have lied, for thou art still unavenged. Yet all that a weak woman could do, I have done."

Then the indomitable spirit which maintained her hold over three or four hundred turbulent tribesmen reasserted itself.

"What folly," she said in her deep voice, "to weep for a dead husband! I might weep all day and all night, for six husbands have I had

since then. And may Allah show them mercy," she added under her breath, "for, by the Prophet, I did not!"

A retainer now entered with a large round mat of woven palm fronds, which he laid on the floor. On this the evening meal was spread, Makia eating with the rest. Haji Rikkan, who entered the *madhif* after we had begun to eat, was peremptorily bidden to share the meal.

Makia's biting, ribald tongue was truly formidable. She seemed to know the private affairs of everyone, and to take pleasure in making them public property. The Haji now became her butt of the moment, and she did not spare his feelings. She commented with sarcasm on the disparity of age between himself and his Riyasa, exposed the subterfuge of the dyed beard—("to lessen the bridal price by two liras!")—and finally, to the delight of her audience, imitated the wretched Haji's melting tones as he called upon his beloved, one tender diminutive following another—"Riyasa—Ruwaisa—O Rusi!"

Haji Rikkan took this rough chaffing in good part, but for the rest of the evening he sat silent and thoughtful. It was evident that he was still torn in two. If he were to be believed, Riyasa

—who may not have possessed all the charms attributed to her by her elderly lover—was not unwilling to marry him; but fear of the consequences held him back. Daring was not the Haji's strong point. He was a genial and friendly soul, a kind host whose acute business instincts never interfered with his generosity. Courage of a kind he had, for his long journeys about the marsh often brought him into touch with tribes with which his own was at feud; but to provoke an enemy in cold blood was another matter. He could not make up his mind.

It was natural that our talk that night should have touched on the position held by women in my country. Makia's respect for us as a nation suffered a severe blow when she learned that the men were too miserly to pay the price of a woman, but got their wives for nothing. The question of votes for women, in a country where to the men elections meant little or nothing, failed to interest her. She was shocked at the lack of seclusion enjoined upon Englishwomen of the upper classes, and when the inconsistency of this attitude with her own unbridled liberty was pointed out to her, ended the discussion abruptly with the curt remark, "I am Makia!"

Our talk later brought up a recent pronouncement of a local *mumin* or divine. A woman had asked him whether, in order to enter Paradise with her husband, she might pray as men did.

"It is not unlawful," he had replied. "But of what avail? Paradise is full of gazelle-eyed houris, among whom thy husband may choose as many as he will. Is it then likely that he will turn from their embraces to those of a wrinkled old hag? No, better not to waste time in praying, but to work and serve thy husband here, where thou canst enjoy his good favour; in Paradise thou wouldst take but small pleasure in seeing him in the arms of others!"

"Patience is of Allah, O Haji," said Makia, with a wicked twinkle in her one eye, on the conclusion of this ruling. A general laugh at Haji Rikkan's expense followed her sally.

"By Allah and the Prophet's head," he said, turning to me, who had missed the significance of Makia's remark. "By my beard—which will soon be grey again—I will have patience. Then shall I have my choice of all the houris in Paradise; and they, the praise to Allah! have no cousins!"

Haji Rikkan had chosen in favour of discretion, and I heard no more of the fair Riyasa.

Chapter X

THE BURDEN OF THE SHAIKH

THE bells of the two mules laden with Haji Rikkan's packs jingled musically in our rear, as he and I jogged on our way towards the Duwairij marsh. We had left the riverain cultivation in the early morning, and the sun was hot on the bare ground of the desert when we heard behind us a party of horsemen, who were rapidly overtaking us as they came on at a steady canter. Coming up with our little cavalcade, they drew rein to exchange greetings. The leader of the party proved to be Mullah Yunis, an old acquaintance of mine, who with a few tribesmen was returning to his master's tents from a mission of importance.

His master Saihud, a boy at the most fourteen years old, had on the death of his famous father been unanimously acclaimed as shaikh by the tribes, a choice which the government, with more than its usual imagination, had confirmed. But within a year the boy had found the handling

of his turbulent tribesmen no easy task. Two headmen in particular had of late become openly estranged, and in his difficulty the young shaikh had sent a letter begging the advice of his uncle, Shaikh Majid. Majid's answer was contained in the letter with which Mullah Yunis had been entrusted.

We rode together for some miles, discussing the interplay of tribal politics. When we came to the parting of our ways, the mullah laughed at my visiting the marshes when the wide desert and the foothills, at this time of the year covered with flowers and deep in grass, held out an alternative so much more attractive. In his master's home, he offered us the hospitality of the shaikh's *madhif,* pitched near the hills where good water—not the brackish water of the Tyb and Duwairij—was abundant.

A sojourn of several years in the Mesopotamian plains made the prospect of a visit to the foot-hills of the Persian border indeed an attractive one, and Mullah Yunis, seeing this, pressed his invitation more warmly than before. But I was pledged to Haji Rikkan, and unwilling to upset his plans.

"Aye," he said in answer to my question, "I would gladly visit Shaikh Saihud, for never in

all my days have I set foot upon a hill. But——"

He was interrupted by one of the mullah's party. *"B'Illah alaik!* Thou a haji, and never hast set foot upon a hill?"

"May thy dwelling be destroyed!" said Haji Rikkan testily. "Never have I set foot upon those hills before us, such were my words. Dost turn thusward at the hour of prayer, O ignorant? By my life," he added with vehemence, "I will indeed set foot upon those very hills!"

Thus, through a slip of the tongue, the Haji agreed to the suggestion of Mullah Yunis. The two mules were sent on to the Duwairij marsh, there to await his coming, while he and I turned our faces to the distant, beckoning hills. Between them and us lay miles of open desert, barren and featureless, devoid of any vegetation but the withered grey-green scrub which seemed to enhance rather than diminish the general impression of aridity. Yet the needy Bedouin knows how to distinguish the many varieties of this one product of the desert, and to put each to its proper use: *tahama* and *righul* are the favourite fodder of the camel; *ishshar* contains a medicinal juice; *arta* provides aromatic delicious-smelling firewood; *dougub* has seed-pods

which may be used as human food; *shanan* has saponaceous qualities; *dubaij* and *haitan* give good grazing for the sheep. The desert, indeed, knows how to provide for her own.

All that afternoon we rode, sometimes at a gentle, ambling canter, more often at the fast walk beloved of Arabs. From time to time we found ourselves heading for a stretch of blue water—familiar and homelike sight to Haji Rikkan; but the water always receded as we approached, or disappeared altogether from sight; for in 'Iraq, mirage is not the traveller's fevered dream of palm-trees shading a bubbling spring, but simply the illusion of a vast expanse of shallow water, in which the distant flocks or caravans appear to be wading knee-deep. Hour after hour we rode, until we sighted on the hillside ahead a group of black dots, like a herd of grazing goats, which slowly resolved themselves into the tents of Shaikh Saihud and his section of the Bani Lām.

"To their bosoms, to their bosoms!" cried some of the younger men, spurring their horses forward at a gallop towards the tents which held their womenfolk. The rest of us, following more sedately, dismounted at the great *madhif*.

The tent in which the shaikh holds audience

is to his people a tangible centre of their tribal life. The shaikh may die or be supplanted, but his successor sits in the same *madhif*. Here matters of tribal policy are debated; here the headmen and wiseacres of the tribe sit round the low fire, eternally sipping their strong, bitter coffee; here the shaikh dispenses justice and receives his guests.

Twice a year among the Bani Lām the *madhif* is set up with ceremony. At the change of season the brown tent of sheep's wool, which provides cool shelter in the hot weather, is replaced by one of black goats' hair, warm against the biting wind and snug against the rains of winter. Each autumn and spring the word goes round the tribe: "on such a day the shaikh sews the *madhif*"; and the vassal headmen ride in to the tribal headquarters. The occasion is a formal one; as the men sew the long strips of woven wool or hair together, the shaikh cries out, "Allah save us from the tyranny of the Oppressors!"[1] As the headmen take the tent poles and lift them aloft, they cry, "In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate!"

The lord of this *madhif* and master of its great flocks was the boy sitting opposite to me—a true

[1] The government.

son of the desert, his birth and breeding stamped on every finely cut feature. Clear dark eyes, lips fresh with a scornful curve, the glow of health under an olive skin—it was a face full of promise for the making of a great man such as his father had been. The boy's dress was simple and unpretentious: a white robe and short white coat, thin black *'aba* with the usual red and gold embroidery at the shoulders; only round his neck was a narrow collar of embossed gold, set in front with a large turquoise.

Round Saihud sat the elders of his tribe, grave-faced, bearded men wrapped in their dark cloaks. The result of the mullah's embassy was being debated. Shaikh Majid's letter, read aloud to the gathering in the tent, advised the young shaikh to go in person to visit his recalcitrant headmen; but morose looks and dubious voices showed that the advice was by no means welcome. Saihud himself, with the impetuosity of youth, was all for going. He himself would settle the matter: was he not shaikh? But the old men in the *madhif,* one after another stating his objections between long pauses for silent deliberation, evidently feared to bring the quarrel to a head. Let the shaikh delay, procrastinate, await a move from 'Aufi and 'Asi.

Saihud carried his point. He would go, and on the morrow; but no voice supported him. Perhaps a feeling of isolation made him welcome his mullah's suggestion that I should accompany him; and it was decided that we should set off at dawn.

The band of horsemen, scattered over the hillside in the first rays of the morning sun, was a picturesque company. The graceful little mares, wide of nostril and narrow of flank, were fresh and mettlesome, and the men—some seventy in number—rode with the careless ease of the desert Arab. Their *'abas* floated behind them in the breeze; many carried rifles slung over their shoulders; or wore curved knives in their belts; many rode with bare feet in the wide, heavy stirrups; and all the dark faces bore the stamp of a hard, vigorous life lived in the open air.

At the head of the party rode Saihud, mounted on a pretty blue roan. The boy's high peaked saddle was hung with blue and gold embroidery, his stirrups were studded with blue stones, and his reins were of soft scarlet leather.

We crossed several ridges, some of sand, some of red sand-stone. Beyond them the country

opened out in a rolling grassy downland, studded with prickly thorn-bushes, and crossed here and there by small, clear, pebbly streams. The grass was thick with flowers, miniatures of the English down-flowers—daisies, trefoil, blue bird's-eye, scarlet poppies, and scabious. Only once during the sunny morning did we stop for a few minutes, when the shepherds of a little hillside village turned out to greet their young shaikh.

"The Bani Lām," said Haji Rikkan, reining his horse nearer to mine, "are Arabs!" By the emphasis of the last word he conferred on them the highest praise in his power to bestow.

"Let me tell a true story," he went on, "a tale not of the ancient days, but one which happened when I was a grown man. Sa'da, daughter of Musa al Madhkur, was a beautiful woman, and Ghadhban of the Bait 'Abdul 'Ali took her in marriage, though forbidden by her cousins the Bait Jandil, her closer kinsfolk. For this the Bait Jandil and the Bait 'Abdul 'Ali fought together, and Sulman al Jandil was killed; whereupon the Bait 'Abdul 'Ali fled to Persia, taking refuge with 'Ali Quli Khan, where they thought to be safe. But Shaikh Banayan, brother of Sa'da, who sided with the Bait Jandil in this matter, attacked them with five hundred horse-

men, and in the battle five of the sons of Ghadhban were killed.

"After the fight the five young men were laid outside their father's tent. He entered; and those who waited without heard him kiss Sa'da, saying, 'What are five sons to me, so long as I have thee?'

"Ma sh'Allah!" exclaimed Haji Rikkan, striking the pommel of his saddle enthusiastically, "Such men are the Bani Lām!

"Nevertheless the Bait 'Abdul 'Ali were forced to flee to Huwaiza; there they stayed for eighteen years, and there Ghadhban died. At last, broken in spirit and stricken with poverty, they made *dakhala* to Ibn Mizban, begging him to intercede on their behalf; they were ready to give twenty women and more, and with them swords of silver and of gold, if but they might return to their lands. Ibn Mizban went to Falaya, head of the Bait Jandil, who called together his brothers and his uncles, and asked them to pardon the Bait 'Abdul 'Ali. But they would not, for they said, 'The blood of our brother Sulman was shed by them, and for this there is no pardon.'

"Then Falaya al Jandil spilt upon the ground a bowl of water.

"'Gather,' he said to them, 'the water that is spilt.'

"'We are not able,' said they.

"'Nor are ye able to gather again the blood of Sulman who is slain. What is past, is past. Will ye not pardon them?'

"And seeing how he entreated, they forgave them; nor would they take any *fasl,* but allowed them to return to their lands. Than the Bani Lām," concluded Haji Rikkan, "there are none more generous, but none"—he dropped his voice —"more proud; and to-day we shall see what we shall see."

As the afternoon wore on, a slight haze smudged the horizon.

"'Aufi and 'Asi," said one of Saihud's retainers; and he was right, for the cloud of dust was soon seen to be caused by a large body of horsemen. "'Aufi and 'Asi!" ran from mouth to mouth. The crisis was at hand; all realized how much depended on the result of this meeting. Could their young shaikh retain the allegiance of his vassals, or, losing it, would he lose also his shaikhship?

As the party approached, the horsemen spread out in a long single line across the plain. The two headmen were offering the traditional form

of reception to a person of rank. It was a good augury, and the number of horsemen left nothing to be desired. A few outriders, as the band drew nearer, galloped in front of the line, crossing and recrossing its length, firing their rifles into the air, and performing a series of curves and evolutions which exhibited at once their own horsemanship and the grace and agility of their mounts.

Saihud's followers quickly formed up in a similar line, and the two parties approached at a foot pace. When they were about fifty yards apart, both lines came to a halt, and the two headmen, dismounting, came forward on foot. Some of our party went to meet them, also on foot; but the young shaikh remained proudly seated on his mare. The headmen waited a moment in silence; then, exchanging an angry glance, turned back abruptly to their horses.

An uncomfortable hush fell over both parties as 'Aufi and 'Asi mounted. No one stirred, until the shaikh, his face white with rage, drove the sharp points of his stirrup-irons into his mare's flanks.

"Can there be peace," cried his clear, angry young voice, "when they have not even said the 'Peace upon you'?" And he led his men for-

ward, the line of 'Aufi's followers breaking to let them pass.

The failure of the two headmen to greet or pay homage to their shaikh, and the boy's resentment, could not pass unnoticed by the tribesmen. Constraint and uneasiness were in the air as we rode on; the laughter and gaiety of the morning were gone.

I found myself riding near the headmen, and tried by a cautious question or two to find out the cause of the quarrel.

"We are become as nothing in his eyes," was all that the austere and stern-featured 'Aufi would vouchsafe; but 'Asi was more communicative.

"Are the old men, the trusted companions of 'Abdul Karim his father, to be thrust aside and neglected, while the place of honour is given to youths? Have the grown men ceased to give good counsel, that no heed is paid to their words? In defeat as in victory we fought for his father, but Saihud remembers it not; our brothers and our uncles shed their blood freely for his house, but this boy forgets it. *W'Allahi,* we who should be the poles of his *madhif* are now no more than the wooden skewers joining together the woven strips of hair."

'Aufi, tall and spare, a dignified figure in spotlessly clean garments, rode on as though he had not heard his companion's words, his expression of cold set anger unaltered. The two men were probably about the same age, but the dyed and clipped beard of 'Aufi made him appear much younger than 'Asi with his weather-beaten face and full grey beard. But though 'Aufi might possess the commanding personality, the imposing appearance of a leader of men, 'Asi's was the golden tongue, the ready eloquence which would persuade them to follow where his brother headmen led. He took up now the tale of their grievance.

"Did not we to-day—men with grey hairs, and the burden of years upon us—come forward on foot to meet him? And what of the shaikh—did he descend from his mare to receive us? Never, never thus were we treated even by his proud father; never were we, headmen of the most famous of all the tribes of the Bani Lām, thus dishonoured before the eyes of our people!"

A few more minutes' ride brought us to the encampment, and we were led to 'Aufi's tent. It seemed dark, gloomy and empty, for our companions, finding perhaps the constrained atmos-

phere little to their liking, had scattered to the hospitality of the other tents.

Saihud sat on a strip of carpet at one end of the tent, with myself and a few of his following. At the other end sat 'Aufi and 'Asi, the one stern and implacable, the other plucking anxiously at his ragged beard. They were neglecting even the most perfunctory courtesies of hospitality, and with every moment of studied neglect the breach between them and the young shaikh grew wider. The air was tense; it seemed that at any moment an angry challenge would be flung, to be as vehemently accepted.

But Saihud had one friend in this hostile tent. The coffee-man, his powerful brew now prepared to his satisfaction, came towards us, in one hand a blackened, long-beaked coffee-pot, in the other three small round cups. He handed coffee in turn to all of us; then, with the easy but respectful familiarity which is so marked a feature of the tribal democracy of the desert, he squatted before the shaikh. Affection and respect were in his voice as he began to talk in low tones, an undercurrent of earnestness was in the light, unexaggerated flattery of his words.

With considerable audacity (I learned after-

wards that the old man was the husband of Saihud's foster-mother, and held a privileged position) he began to explain the headmen's point of view to the boy as his own people had probably never allowed him to see it—for inter-tribal and inter-family intrigue is the curse of the tribal life of the country. He spoke of their services to Saihud's father, of their wounded dignity at finding their counsel unheeded and themselves forgotten; but the shaikh brushed all this aside; it was to-day's affront to his own dignity which held chief place in his mind.

The coffee-man was not repulsed. Had Saihud's own bearing been faultless? In his pride he had waited for two old men to come meekly and kiss his stirrup; well the coffee-man knew how the great 'Abdul Karim would have acted in such a case.

Saihud leaned forward eagerly, and the speaker made good use of the advantage he had gained. Every now and again pouring out coffee to cover his long and unusual stay before his master's guests, he began to tell stories of the boy's father, of the courtesy which had enhanced rather than diminished his renown, of the generosity which had always marked his dealings

with others. The old man's quiet voice flowed on and on in the soothing half-light of the tent; but his stories could not go on for ever, and at last with a muttered *"Y'Allah!"* he rose to his feet and returned to his smouldering fire.

Saihud sat on in silence, his face a mask of youthful impassivity. It was evident that the words of the coffee-man had made an impression, but like all Arabs he took his time over his deliberations. At length he rose abruptly, and with impetuous strides crossed the tent floor to the headmen, who rose mechanically at his approach.

"My uncles ——" said Saihud, his proud head bending to kiss the hand, first of 'Aufi and then of 'Asi.

The dark looks of the old men vanished in a moment. "My son, my son," said the stern 'Aufi, kissing him on both cheeks; while 'Asi, speechless for once, bent to the boy's feet.

From behind the screen which divided the men's from the women's quarters came a shrill high-pitched cry of relief and joy, the tremolo call by which the Arab woman greets good news. It was taken up from tent to tent; men came out at the sound and stood in groups about the en-

campment; suddenly one of them lifted up his voice in a loud chant.

"The Cause of Weeping [2] came nigh to us,
Now it has departed hence!"

A hundred voices took up the words, flocking round the leader; the hoarse, monotonous refrain rose and fell, and the men began to lift and stamp their feet to its rhythm. Arms waved, rifles were brandished and fired into the air. More and more joined in, and soon a compact, swaying body of men was "making *hosa*," moving in ecstatic unison backwards and forwards as they stamped and shouted in the strange, immemorial tribal dance of the Arabs.

Peace between the shaikh and his vassal headmen having been thus restored, Saihud bethought him of his duties as host, which, he seemed to think, the preoccupations of a ruler had caused him to neglect. I wished to visit the hills, did I not? He himself would show them to me; that instant messengers should return to his camp for tents, camels, and food, and we should pitch our camp on the very borders of Persia.

[2] Fighting.

He was as good as his word. We camped the next night on the bank of the river Tyb, in sight of the distant majesty of the Persian mountains, snow-capped giants rising one behind the other until their gleaming summits were lost in the clouds. Immediately in front of our tents, apparently only a few miles away, rose a jagged line of bright red sandstone peaks, through a break in which the river wound its sinuous way towards us—first a streak of silver, then blue, then a deep still green as it silently rounded the promontory on which our camp was pitched. And facing us, on the highest of the red peaks, shone a small white pillar, the boundary mark between Iran and 'Iraq. On the next day we were to ride across the frontier into Persia.

The air was sharp with a breath from the far-off snow when we set off at dawn, the horses as eager as their riders for a gallop over the grassy downland. As the last man swung himself into the saddle we were off, a score of us in a body, with four young foals stretching themselves in the effort to keep up with their dams.

There is no music like the drumming of hoofs on good firm earth, no air like that of wide downs before the heat-haze has come to shut off the horizon, before the sky has lost the tender

pink clouds of early morning. As we raced along, the music of thundering hoofs had its accompaniment of creaking leather, jingling bit and chain, the knocking of rifles against high-peaked saddles, the rattle of swords. When at last horses and men had had enough of that splendid gallop, we had almost reached the ridge which had been a shadowy blur when we set off. Ahead we could see a break in the hills, where a dried-up channel marked what in the time of the rains would be a rushing torrent. Up the river bed we turned, following its windings for some little distance on firm sand, then on hard slippery rocks on which the horses' feet rang, waking a thousand echoes from the rocks above, while the air grew chill as the gorge heightened and narrowed, shutting out the sunlight and all but a slender strip of sky.

We climbed for an hour, until horses were streaming and men parched. The Arabs began to talk of a well at the top of the pass, famous for water of an unparalleled sweetness. We reached it; but where was the well of clear cold water which I had been imagining? Experience might have taught me to expect no more than we found—a shallow hole in the ground containing a few inches of muddy water,

in which stood a muleteer scooping up water for his beasts. He was dressed in baggy black trousers and felt skull-cap, first sign that we had crossed the arbitrary frontier fixed in 1914 by the four powers of Russia, Persia, Turkey and Great Britain—arbitrary because it cut through the heart of the Bani Lām country, leaving part of that great tribal confederation in Iran, and part in 'Iraq.

This was the top of the pass, and we began to descend on the other side slowly and carefully, for here there was no river bed to show the path. We had almost reached the plain when, rounding a high projecting bluff, we came suddenly upon a handful of brown tents, the dwellings of some of Saihud's scattered tribesmen.

The older men hastened forward as usual to greet their shaikh, but some excitement beyond that caused by his unexpected arrival was evident in their gestures. Crowding round Saihud's mare, they barely went through the form of kissing his hand before they burst into eager speech, anxiously asking whether on our way we had met 'Alwan and Challub. There were cries of exasperation when the shepherds learned that we had come by a different route from that taken by their two headmen, who had set out in the

early morning on learning that Saihud was encamped in the neighbourhood.

The tale of their grievance was shouted at us by a dozen excited voices. From the torrent of rapid guttural speech I gathered with difficulty that four hundred sheep had been driven off by 'Ali Quli Khan, a son of the Wali of the Pusht-i-Kuh. Details of time and place were lost in the general hubbub.

The shepherds, gathered in a gesticulating group round their young shaikh, implored his help to avenge the outrage. Some urged him to collect a band of his following, some pleaded their former services, some suggested forms of revenge, but all were of one mind in volunteering to follow and attack the raiders if but given Saihud's permission.

"'Ali Quli Khan—may his grave be defiled!—says that these lands are Persian lands," shouted one, making himself heard above the rest by sheer vocal power. "But we say that from the time of our grandfathers, aye, and the grandfathers of our grandfathers, they have been the lands of the Bani Lām."

"What is it to us," another cried, "if four or forty nations divide our land, saying that this side of the pillars goes to the Turk, and that to

the Persian? Has it not been ours from the time of 'Aus?"

"Look," said a black-bearded shepherd, pointing to a line of low, fantastically-shaped hills, "yonder lie the Graves of the Heroes, the first of our tribe, who died in securing for us their descendants this grazing land which now the Persians claim!"

"W'Allahi, even to-day no Persian dares to settle here without our favour. Our fathers won the land by the sword, and, by Allah and my honour, by the sword we can hold it!"

"Gently, gently," broke in an old man, who seemed to command the respect of the wilder members of the tribe, for they fell silent and made way for him as he came to Saihud's stirrup and spoke in milder tones of protest.

"O protected of Allah, our men sit outside the tents, spinning wool even as the women, while our youths milk the few poor sheep left us by the marauding Lurs. Far otherwise did they live, a few short years ago; but now the government has forbidden us to fight with the tribes across the border, and because we are weaker than the government we obey. Yet surely this government is just as well as strong? Let it defend our flocks, or let it recover what has been stolen; and

if it cannot do this, let it give us leave to follow these thieving Lurs, and settle the affair ourselves. Are we to be robbed, and fold our hands; are we to be plundered, and not recover what is ours?"

There was a murmur of assent, followed by silence as the tribesmen eagerly waited for their shaikh's decision. One could not but sympathize with these rough, eloquent shepherds, whose obstinate pride made them continue to graze their flocks in territory which technically was no longer theirs; but the real burden lay on the youthful shoulders of Saihud, whose decision was to be final. Though undisputed ruler of a large and powerful tribe, he was yet the servant of the government, and knew far better than the shepherds that its order against border fighting must be obeyed. He looked longingly in the direction in which the raiders had driven off their booty; his hand tightened on the rein, and his eyes shone with excitement. I expected, almost hoped, that he would give the word to follow; but as the boy drew himself up more erect than before in the saddle, his words were not those of headstrong youth.

"I will speak with 'Alwan and Challub," he said firmly.

A look of grievous disappointment showed itself on the faces of the tribesmen. The light died out of eager eyes, and the group broke up in silence; but there was no murmuring against the decision, no effort to reopen the case.

We turned in our tracks, and began to climb the hillside once more; but the zest had gone out of our ride. As we went I reflected on the difficult position of the shaikh of to-day. If he obeys the government, his tribes are likely to desert him for a bolder, more defiant leader; if he prefers the support of his people to the approval of government, he courts deposition. One cannot but wonder how far the shaikhs of the future will succeed in maintaining their precarious position. Will the tradition-bound tribes at length acquiesce in the government's policy of tying them down to the land, or will they assert to the end their freedom to wander over the face of the desert, as they have done from time immemorial?

We reached our camp, to find 'Alwan and Challub patiently awaiting the return of Saihud. They lost no time in relating the story, and while they talked I clambered down the cliff to the river's edge with Haji Rikkan, who had spent the day in camp; for even his tough skin

had not withstood the unwonted exercise of the last three days. There we fished with improvised rod and line, until the gathering darkness drove us back to the tents, where we found a silent, depressed little group sitting round the embers.

To Shaikh Saihud had fallen the difficult task of proving that the pen was mightier than the sword, that a visit to the Mutasarrif in 'Amara, who would write to the authorities in Baghdad, who in their turn would write to those in Teheran, was a better way to recover the stolen sheep than a swift pursuit of the fleeing robbers. But his heart was not in his own argument.

"By Allah, if it were not for the English," he concluded, "our sheep, and as many more besides to wipe out the insult, would be in our hands before to-morrow's night!"

"Eh b'Illah," assented Shaikh 'Alwan, "it is not the Arab government, but the English whom we fear. Many years it is since I saw an Englishman," continued the deep, husky voice of the headman, who, lacking the usual rhetoric of the Arabs, made up for its loss by the vehemence of his gestures. "I will tell thee," he went on, turning to me, "of the first I saw. During the war, on the day that the tribes under Sabri Beg and Mohammad Pasha Daghistani burnt the

muhailas at the village of Shaikh Sa'd, Shaikh Chittab al Sa'id attacked a launch, a telegraph launch. He sank it, and captured an Englishman, whom he sent to Sabri Beg, the Turkish commandant of the tribes. With Sabri Beg were many shaikhs and headmen of the Bani Lām and the Rabi'a, and I among them. What had we heard of the English, save of Cowley and his ship the Majidiya? Now we should see an Englishman. Would he have four eyes or two, two mouths or one? He came. All red and white he was, his head up—so—and his arms swinging—thus—though he was wounded in the arm, and again by a bullet which entered his side and came out at his chest. Three thousand of us stared at him, our mouths agape—thus.

"Now with Sabri Beg was one who had run away from the Russians, and through him the Turk spoke with the Englishman.

" 'How many troops has thy general?' he asked. And the Englishman threw back his head and laughed aloud thus—ha! ha!—though he was wounded in the arm, and again by a bullet which went in at his side and came out at his chest.

" 'Ask him why he laughs,' said Sabri Beg to the Muscovi.

" 'I laugh to find myself among such savages,' replied the Englishman. 'I am wounded here and here, yet am I asked questions when I should be sent to hospital.'

"Then Sabri Beg in anger drew the dagger, saying, 'Answer my question, or die!'

"But the Englishman—mark it, he was wounded in the arm, and again by a bullet which entered at his side and came out at his chest—threw back his head again, laughing loudly as before, thus—ha! ha! ha!

" 'Why does he laugh?' again asked Sabri, for he was puzzled.

" 'I laugh,' said the Englishman, 'to find myself among men so ignorant. Is not the road to England a six months' journey? And how can one man count the troops on that long road?'

"Then Sabri Beg sheathed his dagger, and hiding his beard in his hand left the tent. But we, having seen what we had seen, went back to our flocks, and fought no more against the English." [1]

[1] According to Shaikh 'Alwan, this unnamed Englishman was captured two days before the first battle of Kut, i.e. Sept. 26th, 1915. If he is still alive, he may be interested to learn of the impression made upon the tribes by his defiance of Sabri Beg.

Chapter XI

GHALIB THE EXILE

TURNING our backs on the hills, we set off the next morning into the desert. Shaikh Saihud, with the courtesy of the Arab host, had insisted on accompanying us on the first stage of our journey, as far as the edge of the marsh formed by the waters of the Tyb and Duwairij rivers. There we should part, Haji Rikkan to earn his precarious livelihood by the infinitesimal profits of his bartering, I to 'Amara to pick up the boat for Baghdad, Saihud to return to his encampment at the foot of the hills.

We had not ridden long before the sun rose in threatening splendour, auguring a hot day; and our forebodings were confirmed when a burning, blistering wind arose. The heat was exceptional for so early in the year, and soon both man and beast had reason to regret that we had brought so little water with us on our long day's journey. Before us and behind lay great blue lakes; but the mirage did but mock

our thirst. It was not until nearly evening that we sighted a wide stretch of water that, unlike those which had hovered before our eyes during the whole of that long waterless march, did not vanish as we approached. The tired horses raised their heads, the men gave inarticulate grunts of satisfaction as they quickened their pace over the last few hundred yards of parched earth. Then desert met marsh, with startling suddenness, in a ripple of small waves on ribbed sand golden in the light of sunset. Miles of clear blue water lay ahead, broken in the distance by a line of reeds, black against the orange sky.

Miles of water! The men, dismounting, hastened to the edge, and clearing with a sweep of the hand the foam and flotsam which had gathered on the surface, each tossed up water into his mouth until his thirst was quenched. The horses, following, tasted with fastidious distrust, then drank eagerly.

Without waste of time one of the shaikh's men took down his nail-studded box from the laden mule which carried it, and began to make tea. Two were despatched to gather fodder for the horses, another two to collect fuel. The rest squatted round the samavar while the tea-maker handed round small glasses of the heavily

sweetened tea which is magical in its power to dissipate fatigue.

"O shaikh," said one of the fuel-gatherers, returning, "I have found hoof-marks of buffaloes, but lately made."

"Good!" cried Saihud. "Hither Zaid, hither Khadhaiyir. Go search for these marshmen. They will have milk, or fresh fish, perchance, for the sahib. Hasten!"

From far away across the grey stretches of the desert came a musical, long-drawn cry. It drew nearer; the light was now too dim for the baggage-camels to be seen in the distance, but the clear, monotonous *"Lon hawa, lon hawa,"* of the Badawi herdsman grew louder and louder. Suddenly they loomed up out of the half-light, a line of five or six abreast, looking huge, monstrous in the deepening gloom. Quickly the Arabs gathered round them. The camels knelt in grumbling obedience, the heavy loads were toppled off, and the tired beasts, each with one fore-leg bent upwards and firmly tied above the knee so that wandering far afield was impossible, went hobbling off into the darkness to find what grazing they could.

Now the low hair tent was quickly erected, and before it a fire was kindled with the scrub

of the desert. Round the fire the Arabs squatted, smoking in silence. A few yards apart, his shoes of scarlet leather placed beside the folded *'aba* which served as prayer-mat, their young shaikh swayed and rose and knelt again as he pattered half aloud the evening prayer.

A warning shout went up from one of the group round the fire, to be answered by Zaid and Khadhaiyir, whose dim and shadowy forms now returned into the circle of light. Behind them came a third, carrying on his back a bundle tied up in an *'aba*. Throwing it open, he let fall to the ground a dozen large fish, which gleamed and shimmered as a freshly flung armful of scrub flamed high on the fire. To split them open, roughly clean, and toss them on some glowing embers scraped from the fire, was the work of a few moments, and the meal was ready. As we ate I noticed that Haji Rikkan was coming in for some good-natured chaff.

"What, eat no fish? Dost not like the flavour, after mutton for so many days?" said one, another adding, "The shaikh will wonder if thou eatest not of what he has provided."

This last was obviously meant for Saihud to hear, and he did his equally obvious duty by asking why the Haji would eat no fish.

"It is a long story," he said with a gratified laugh. "If these wind-bags will let us finish the meal in peace, I will tell it afterwards."

Supper ended, we drew in more closely round the camp-fire, and Haji Rikkan began his tale.

"Many years ago, when I was a beardless youth, I set out with my cousins Zunaiyid and Mohammad 'Ali to take a boat-load of pomegranates to Khafajiya, a three days' journey across the marsh. It chanced that on the second night we slept at the village of the Bani Salih, whose shaikh gave us food and shelter. But we were hungry youths, and he was not over-generous, so that the food set before us was quickly eaten, and still our hunger was unappeased. And Mohammad 'Ali in disgust struck the empty platter.

"Now among us such an action, though unseemly, is not a grave matter; but by the Bani Salih it is counted the greatest of insults, as setting at naught their hospitality. Before many minutes had passed a servant came from their shaikh, bidding us eat with him that night; and we had no choice, for we saw that he had set armed men upon our *mashhuf*.

"When we entered the guest-house, we saw prepared for us a great dish of forty fishes—yes,

forty, no less, I swear by Allah!—surrounded by baskets of bread. The shaikh of the Bani Salih was there, and by his side lay his naked sword."

Haji Rikkan paused impressively, and sipped at the cup of coffee offered him.

"For this was the custom of the Bani Salih: that if any man struck the empty platter, thus slighting their hospitality, he should be bidden to another meal, and if he failed to eat all the food provided for him, should be slain by the sword."

I looked doubtfully at Haji Rikkan's wrinkled face, trying to see from the expression of his deep-set eyes whether this was to be taken seriously. But his neighbour, seeing my look, hastened to confirm his words.

"It is true, Sahib," he said. "The same custom still exists among the Albu Rashid, and men say that once in the days of Na'ma one who struck the platter was bidden by the shaikh to eat with him that night, and found before him a great pile of rice. The shaikh's servant said to his master, 'Shall I bring thy sword?' He answered, 'Nay, bring it not. This rice is my sword.' And his words were true, for that Arab ate all the rice, and going down to the river to drink there, fell down dead. And yet another ——" The

speaker caught the baleful glare of Haji Rikkan's eye upon him, and lapsed into silence.

"What befell thee and thy cousins, O Haji?" I asked.

"We ate the forty fishes and all the bread. And while we ate the shaikh bade his servants bring in another forty, and fill the baskets again with bread. This too we ate, but to our dismay *khubz tabug* was set before us, fresh cooked and very filling. So I whispered to my companions, bidding them eat slowly as though exhausted; and this we did, until those who watched us grew careless, and went to tell the shaikh that we should soon have eaten to our limit. Then very quickly we devoured what was left, and seizing the dishes and baskets we rushed to the river and threw them in before they could be replenished. Thus we escaped with our lives, for we ate all that was set before us."

"Nay, nay, that is not the end of the tale," cried one of the men round the fire.

"I tell only true tales to the Sahib," replied Haji Rikkan with dignity.

"No matter, finish the story," insisted the man, to whom it was evidently no new one.

"As thou wilt; the rest is soon told. To show these people of the Bani Salih that our hunger

was not yet sated, we went down all three to our *mashhuf,* and there ate, each of us, a score of the pomegranates which we were taking for sale."

While we were all laughing at this veracious ending, there came a faint hail across the dark water.

"Haji Rikkan, is he with you? the Haji, the Haji-i-i-i-i."

"Ee, ee," shouted the old man. It was the the voice of his muleteer, and once again I marvelled at the way in which such meetings, casually arranged, were infallibly achieved when the great distances, the scanty population, and the lack of time-pieces seemed to conspire to make any such rendezvous impossible.

The hail was repeated as the boat drew nearer, lest we should fire on the silently approaching craft. Haji Rikkan rose, bade us after the Arab fashion a curt farewell, and vanished into the night.

Anywhere, and at any time, a wood fire is delightful; but on a chilly night in the open spaces of the desert it is perfect. The flames rose and fell, the shadows flickered, the pungent smoke of the aromatic brushwood smote our eyes and assailed our nostrils. Shaikh Saihud broke the silence.

"Did the marshman also go, he who brought the fish?"

"Nay, I am here," came a voice from beyond the fire. "But no marshman am I."

"Art not of the *Ma'dan?*" asked the shaikh in surprise.

"Nay, by Allah, I am not of these marsh-dwellers. By thy head, no! Though I have grown old with long living in the swamps, yet I and my fathers before me first opened eyes on the wide deserts. Of the true Arab stock am I, of the Bani Sabah, of the Koraish, of the tribe of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and give him peace!"

The unseen speaker paused, but no one spoke. Then, in response to the silent invitation, he began his story, speaking slowly in the long-drawn-out drawl of the desert.

"It was the will of Allah that I, Hantush, should serve the shaikh of my tribe as his body-servant. Lord of great flocks was he. In peace and freedom we roamed the desert, moving our houses of hair as we followed the sheep where grazing was to be found. But there came a time when Allah willed otherwise. In that night of blood and vengeance, when all was lost, I led my lord away. Across the desert we fled, we

galloped into the night, we escaped from death. The shaikh bore with him, clasped in his arms as he rode, all that was left alive of those dear to him—a girl child, daughter of but one year. As for me, I had gathered together what gold and jewels I might. Our flight was long and far, and when at last we reached these marshes the wide waters seemed as a haven, and the reeds as sheltering walls.

"Here, then, we stayed, none knowing whether we lived or died. Shaikh Ghalib ere long was feared by the buffalo-keepers, and honoured in the marsh village as he had been in the desert; but the heart was gone out of him. All he cared for in life was to watch the daughter that was left to him, to see her young beauty blossoming like the desert after rain, to rejoice as she grew straight and tall as the reeds of the marsh.

"The summers came and went. As a man tells the hours by a watch, so did I count the years by the growth of Sadiqa; and when she was approaching womanhood I knew we had been exiles for nigh a score. I saw that as with the years she grew in comeliness, the heart of my lord grew more content; he ceased to sigh for the hair tents and the open spacious desert, ceased to finger his rifle and mutter of revenge.

He found happiness in her beauty, and often would he murmur '*Allah karim*—God is bountiful,' as he watched the maiden husking rice, or washing it at the water's edge.

"But as for me, my heart was uneasy. To me it seemed that her growing up to womanhood was like a small and slender flame that runs along the ground, unregarded until it reaches a reed house, when lo! all is flames, and beating of breasts, and tearing of hair. For among the marsh women Sadiqa was like a fleet gazelle among a herd of buffaloes, and already the young men of the village were bandying her name among them. Presumptuous jackals! A clap of the hands, and they would have shrunk cringing away; but Ghalib scorned to notice them. Yet my heart leapt and was like to die with fear when I heard that she was desired by Haddam bin Mahawis.

"He should have been desert-born! A man, a very pasha of a man was Haddam—strong, bold, venturesome and valorous, and good to look upon withal. He belonged not to the tribe with which we dwelt, but to a neighbour tribe, yet kin to ours. Much loved was this youth, and more feared, for his hot head and ready hand were famed throughout the marsh. Yet over-

weening was his pride indeed, who dared to hope for the daughter of my lord as wife. No Arab of less than noble blood would claim the daughter of a shaikhly house; yet this base-born marshman, whose sire and dam were buffaloes, himself unworthy to be the bearer of her shoes, thought to take her. *Eh b'Illah,* the very heart retched at the thought."

Hantush spat, and paused to roll a cigarette. One of the tribesmen, rising, flung on to the dying fire a bundle of brushwood. The crackling flames threw a fitful, ruddy light on the dark faces gathered round; occasionally a darting flame revealed the outer ring of horses and crouching camels, and seemed to give an added blackness to the dark desert beyond. Behind the deep shadow which was the tent, scattered pinpoints of light glimmered on the water, where the marshmen, each with a torch in his boat to attract his prey, were spearing fish.

"Aye, in those days my mind was troubled." Hantush took up his tale. "And with reason, for one night, when the men of the village were gathered to drink coffee in my master's house, a shot was heard.

" 'Who, who is there?' cried some, and 'Friend?' cried others.

"'It is I, Haddam,' a voice answered from the darkness.

"'Have a care,' shouted one of the headmen. 'Our weapons are loaded. What seekest thou?'

"'My bride! I have come to speak with her father.'

"'Who is the maiden?' several voices asked.

"'Ho, ho! Who is she?' cried Haddam. 'Is more than one jewel to be found among your filth? Does more than one flower blossom on your dung-heap?'

"'He has come to ask for Sadiqa,' the whisper ran from mouth to mouth.

"My master stood like a man of wood—blind, deaf, and dumb. Then he turned, seized a rifle from one near him, and fired it towards the mocking voice. To that shot the echo was a scream of pain, abruptly ending. Then fell a great stillness upon the night—such a silence that we became aware of the whispering of the rushes, and the small lapping of the water on the island mud. It was broken by the sound of a man crashing through the reeds, and then the voice of Haddam was raised in a loud cry.

"'My cousin, alas, alas, my cousin! The mercy of Allah upon him! I, Haddam, vow vengeance on his slayer; his blood shall be

requited.' The reeds crashed again, and the voice came nearer.

"'Hearken, ye dogs of the Albu Fahad. Offer me no *fasl* of women: I desire none other woman than one. But blood-money will I take, and this night. My comrades surround your village, and the throat of every living thing, man or beast, shall be slit if by the setting of the moon the blood-price of Mohammad be not paid. Seventy red liras is my demand, and thus shall I enforce it'—and a bullet splashed water in our faces as we stood staring into the darkness.

"The headmen stopped not to discuss the matter. 'Agreed, agreed,' they cried, and began to hasten from hut to hut, demanding from each household its share. So every man brought forth money from his secret store, each wrangling bitterly over the amount as he paid. From time to time the elders entered the headman's house, bearing kerchiefs in which they had collected coins of gold, and copper, and silver. And when the sum was nearly reached, one Balasim called across the water.

"'We swear by Allah, aye, by 'Ali himself, the Lord of the Faithful, that though we have searched every house, no more than fifty liras can we find.'

"'Seventy,' cried Haddam answering, 'seventy, or we fire.'

"'Seventy, seventy,' those cowards replied. 'They are ready. Come and fetch them.'

"But Haddam swore out of the darkness, 'Brother of Basha! Would you thus entrap and slay me? Ye yourselves shall bring them; nay, —and he laughed aloud—'the women who will attend my bride shall bring them.'

"So in fearful haste a boat was brought, and such beldams as stood by were driven into it. Frightened and wailing, they paddled slowly off into the night, while we waited—waited, it seemed, so long that we started when the voice of Haddam rose once again in mocking tones.

"'Listen, O brave ones,' it said, and for the second time that death-cry broke upon the silent marsh. 'Ho, ho, my dead cousin! Bury him well when ye find him! Praise be to the All-Powerful that ye have furnished me with a dowry; I shall come again for my bride—and next time, not alone!'

"The morning dawned, but the daily tasks of the Albu Fahad were not begun. The buffaloes were not led off to graze, and the women stood outside the houses in chattering groups, until they were driven within by the men to prepare

the morning meal. In every dwelling could be heard murmurs and mutterings as men talked of the night's doings; every tongue was ready with curses, every heart full of anger. For what more galling than that one man's cunning should deceive a whole village, what more bitter than that one man's guile should extort from them that gold which these miserly marsh-dwellers hold dearer than life? By each one of the Albu Fahad, that handful of *krans* had been more cherished than the life of his neighbour.

"What wonder that they murmured? But as I listened, I found that not Haddam alone was the object of their curses. Many, it seemed, held my master the cause of their misfortune; and as the morning wore on their words gained weight among the villagers, and grew in bitterness. Shaikh Ghalib, not their own craven cowardice, was the author of all their troubles. Greed and fear strove with the respect of years, and at noon the elders of the tribe, with shame on their faces, came to my lord's house.

"He guessed their errand, but made them welcome, bidding me prepare coffee. Then the headman spoke.

" 'For many years have we lived at peace with our neighbours; but now there is risen a cause

of dissension among us. Allah has ordained that male shall strive with male to possess the female, yet it is a sore thing for us to see our young men at enmity one with another; and worse, a danger to the tribe itself, when strangers from without contend with them. Thou knowest, O Shaikh, that we are a weak people living among powerful neighbours, that we are few and they many. Willingly would we continue to harbour thee and thine, and give thee refuge, had we the power; but our strength is as water before the might of others. For thy safety and ours, it is better that thou seek the protection of a stronger tribe. True, we shall mourn at thy departing, but our grief will find consolation in the knowledge of thy greater safety.'

"Anger burned within me when I heard the rest assent in low voices to these shameful words. 'Better that he leave us. Aye, the truth is in thy hand, O Mutlag. We are indeed weak, let him take the girl to a stronger tribe.'

"But Ghalib, cutting short the growling of these curs, spoke proudly. 'The words I must say are a disgrace to my tongue, but among a people without shame such words become easy. Nigh a score of years ago I came to this accursed marsh, seeking no man's protection, but making

my dwelling apart, alone. It chanced that a plague had smitten your buffaloes, so that ye were in despair; so when I of my desert knowledge taught you how to cure them, did ye not beseech me to move my house and dwell among ye? This I did, and since that day ye have besought my help in times of stress, in disputes you have begged my intervention. In difficulty when did I withhold advice? In distress when did I refuse help? And among yourselves, and among buffalo-keepers like yourselves, you boasted, 'In our village dwells a man of the shaikhly house of the Bani Sabah, of the Koraish, of the very tribe of the Prophet: thus are we become nobler than our fellows.'

"'Yet now, now that your neighbour is no longer rich, but poor; now that he is old before his time with much sorrow; now that his household has become a source of contention among you; now that he seems to need help and protection as once he gave it—let us be rid of him, ye say. Dogs and sons of dogs! I and mine are of the true Arab stock. We seek no man's protection. To us, death is preferable to loss of honour. Know this then: where my house has stood a score of years, there stay I and mine. If our

presence brings you danger, the marsh is wide. Seek ye new homes.'

"Silence held all men. Then spoke Ruwaidhi son of Mahdi—a blind man, yet none the less wise in council, and his words ever heeded in the tribe.

" 'Spare us, O Ghalib, these bitter words. What need for thee or us to move hence, when the matter of our dispute is one easy to settle? When the fruit is ripe, Allah ordains that it fall. When a maid becomes a woman, it is his will that a mate be found for her. Wouldst defy this decree of the Almighty, and bring punishment upon thyself and on thy daughter? If it be that thou canst not find a husband for her from among thine own people, then let her become wife to one of our youths; for our tribes are not lacking in men brave of heart and strong of arm. Are not my words wise words, my uncles?'

"But my master answered in anger, 'My daughter marry one of ye? By the life of Allah and of Mohammad and of 'Ali, never!'

"Thereupon the elders of the village rose, and left him. And as they went, I heard one say to another, 'On his own head be it.'

"That day my master called me, saying, 'We have not yet given our share of the money paid

over to Haddam. No man shall say that Ghalib's poverty was such that he failed to pay his share. Go, Hantush, borrow the *mashhuf* of our neighbour Burghash, and put in it the reed mats woven by thee and by Sadiqa. We will take them to the river, there thou shalt sell them.'

"So I bade Sadiqa carry to the water's edge the mats which we had stacked beside the house, while I sought out Burghash and asked of him the loan of his craft. And when the mats were piled in the belly of the boat, and all was ready, the shaikh came from his house to join us. I sat in the stern with my paddle, and in the bow stood Sadiqa with her pole; for the maid was strong and supple, and skilful in water-craft as the marsh girls among whom she dwelt.

"Soon we left the open water, and passed down the narrow ways, shaded on either side by high reeds. My lord, as was his wont, sat in silence, gazing on the beauty of his daughter; and I too gazed, for though I have seen many women, and some beautiful, not one have mine eyes lighted on that could compare with her shadow. Aye, *w'Allah wa b'Illah,* the tongue is too short to describe the loveliness of my mistress. As she drove her pole deep in the

water, her body bent like a tall palm-tree swaying in the wind; her hair was black and smoothly braided, her skin like the bloom on apricots, her eyes fitly set, dark as night yet bright as the stars.

"All was peace as we threaded the marsh, all silence save when a bird took wing, startled at our approach. The soft wind bore on its breath nothing but the whispering of the reeds, until after a long space our ears caught a sound we knew well—the noise made by a man cutting reeds. Now though Allah made all men of one clay, he made them not all in the same mould; and ye of the desert perhaps know not that no two sons of Adam cut reeds in the same fashion. Thus it is that the marsh-dwellers, though they cannot see for the thickness of the reeds, know well by the sound he makes who it is that cutteth, and whether he be friend or foe. So we ceased from our paddling, and sat still that we might listen.

"We heard the rustle of the swaying reeds as the unseen one gathered them in his arm, the crash as with one mighty stamp of his foot he bent them to the ground, then the swift slash with which his sickle severed them from their roots. Only a strong man could cut reeds with such speed and sureness, only one had that sweep

of arm. Not one of us but knew who was near: it was Haddam of the Albu Dagar, he whose mere name had held our village spell-bound with fear the night before.

"As we looked one at the other, the voice of Ghalib broke the silence.

" 'Back, back,' he cried hoarsely. 'Back to the village!'

"Astonishment held me voiceless, motionless. Well might the base-born marshmen tremble and flee from the unseen presence of such as Haddam; but was not one Arab a match for any ten of them? Sadiqa, flushing red, spoke my thoughts.

" 'My father! We will not go back with our purpose unaccomplished. Our mats are not yet sold. Why this haste, this seeming fear? The cutter of reeds is yet distant from us, nor does any channel lead into this channel. If the prudence of age speaks, O father, are we not armed?'

"Ghalib took no heed of her words.

" 'A curse upon thee, son of a dog!' cried he, seizing the paddle from my hand. 'Dost dare to tarry when I bid thee return?'—and with one thrust he turned the prow of the *mashhuf* towards the way we had come.

"I took the paddle and fell to work. Was I not his servant? But Sadiqa's pole lay idle, and she sat in brooding anger in the bow, no word for me nor for her father crossing her lips. Shame lay heavy upon her, as upon me, by reason of our turning back.

"So to me, as I thought with uneasy heart on the night and the day that were past, the figure of this Haddam loomed large like that of some evil *jinn* which threatened the safety of those beloved by me. And as I looked at my master my fears grew heavier. Broken and bent he seemed, a man old in his prime, a man on whom the evil ones had cast a spell, so that in every hour he aged a year.

"We reached the village, and with not so much as a glance at her father the maiden left the boat and sought her house. But Ghalib, looking up mournfully at me as he sat in the stern, said, 'Didst see, Hantush?'

" 'See? I saw naught. I did but hear Haddam cutting reeds.'

" 'I asked not what thou heardst. Didst see naught?'

" 'Nothing, my uncle,' I replied.

" 'Dolt and dullard!' cried my lord in anger.

'Thou seest naught, yet we are undone. Undone, aye, and worse. Woe to me and my house, woe!'

"To answer availed nothing. With no reply I began to take the mats from the *mashhuf,* meaning to stack them again in the lee of the house; but he stopped me.

"'Owl! To-morrow we take the mats to the river—to-morrow at dawn. Aye, and to-morrow also this contention shall cease, for by Allah's truth, the key of the door of escape is in my hand'—and he strode away.

"When I had secured the boat, I followed. All was silent in the house. No sound came from behind the women's screen, no sound was heard where the shaikh sat without movement. But as I hastened to kindle a fire that I might make coffee for him, I saw what in these many weary years of exile I had never seen. And my breast was straitened as the tears rolled down his cheeks, so that I smote my eyes and cursed them, that in that hour when Fate had stricken him they had been blind, not seeing what his had seen."

The rhythmic rise and fall of the speaker's voice, and the unhesitating march of his story, showed that the tale was one which, like some saga of old, had been many times told and had

lost nothing in the telling. By many a camp-fire, to many a silent, crouching circle, must this tragic history have been unfolded—embroidered, perhaps, and improved with each repetition, yet preserving always that living and authentic spirit of Arab life, in which lay its appeal.

"The night passed," Hantush continued after a pause, "and with the first dim light before the sunrising I went down to the boat. There already was Sadiqa.

" 'Eight *krans* shall we bring back as the price of these mats, perhaps ten, O Hantush,' she said.

" '*In sh'Allah,* ten,' I replied, but only to please her; for I feared that for these mats of ill-omen we should never obtain a price. My lord joined us then, and in the grey dawning we left the village. Once more we watched Sadiqa swaying to each strong thrust of her pole; and the sun, rising above the high reeds, saluted her beauty.

"Thus we went, until we came to a place where our water-channel became two branches. Now the speediest way to the river lay by the right-hand channel, that same one which we had taken yesterday—yesteryear it seemed to me—and whence, on hearing the sound of one cutting

reeds, we had returned incontinent to our village. The left-hand channel led also to the river, but by a way so long and devious that it was little used.

"Now my lord broke the silence, saying, 'To the left, to the left. I would pass by the *ishan* of Umm Furukh.'

"Sadiqa's face grew dark. Though, with the shame of yesterday still sharp in her mind, she spoke no word, she thought her father chose the longer way through fear of Haddam. But my heart knew that it was ordained by Fate that we should take the way which led to Umm Furukh. I swung the boat's prow across, and swiftly we passed down the left-hand waterway. Who can fight against Fate?

"Howbeit, no man desires to hasten on his doom. As the time passed, my strokes grew dull and feeble, so that we moved but slowly, hindered also by the weeds which here grew thick on the face of the water. We made no speed, yet my master called not to us to hasten; so that by reason of the long and devious way I knew that he did not in truth desire to reach the river—that the selling of mats was but a guile to deceive us. Foreboding lay heavy on me. The rolled-up mats took on the form of

corpses which I was taking for burial, and the sound of the reeds was like mourners weeping for their dead. *W'Allah,* that day's journey has seared my heart as if with hot iron!

"At last the reeds gave way to open water, and there in the midst of the clearing stood the *ishan* of Umm Furukh. So small it was and so solitary that no man dwelt there; instead, the tribes buried their dead upon it. And as we approached, my master said, 'Bank in.'

"I turned the boat to the *ishan.* When we reached the land's edge, Shaikh Ghalib stepped from the boat, and taking his daughter's hand led her up the shore. Then, turning to me, he said,

" 'Leave not the place where thou art, until I come again.'

" 'Upon my eyes,' I replied.

"The two walked hand in hand to the top of the mound, and going down the other side were lost to my sight. So short was the distance, so still the air, that all their speech came clearly back to me; and when, after a long silence, the words of my mistress reached my ear, I knew for what purpose he had beguiled her to this lonely place, and bowed my head before the inscrutable will of Allah.

" 'Why is thy manner so strange, O Father?' she asked, and fear was in her voice. 'Why so stern and silent? O, let us hasten from this place of graves, for I am afraid.'

" ' 'Tis thy guilt which makes thee fear,' he answered harshly. 'If a woman betray the honour of her house, what is the penalty? According to the law of our fathers, is it not death?'

" 'Ah, say it not,' the child wept.

" 'And, in our tribe, if a woman of the shaikhly house mates, ay, does but desire to mate with a man of lesser birth, does she not break the honour of her tribe?'

" 'So thou hast often told me, my father.'

" 'Thou knowest, then, why I have brought thee hither.'

" 'Ah, no!' she cried then. 'Thou couldst not slay me; me thy joy, the comforter of thy lonely days, the solace of thine exile! Thou couldst not live without me. Ah, see, I stroke thy beard. Am I not thy daughter, only flesh of thy flesh?'

"Had she been thrice guilty, my heart had melted at her pleading. How then when I knew she could never have debased herself? But my lord answered nothing.

" 'Oh, a curse upon the elders of the tribe!' cried the girl. 'They have perplexed thy mind

with their foolish words, their evil speech has taken away thine understanding. Think, think of thy grief when I am dead, the bitterness that will fill thy heart when thou sayest, "She was innocent, yet I believed their tattling tongues, and this right hand has taken her life." O my father, how canst credit their lying jealous speech?'

"'Not all the gossiping tongues of all the world,' cried my lord, 'could smirch thee in my sight; but alas! my own eyes—would I were blind!—have given me proof. When we heard from our boat that cutter of reeds at work, these eyes watched thine, and saw in them such a light as only shines when a woman loves.'

"'Foolish one,' said Sadiqa, 'often hast thou likened my eyes to pools of clear water; what thou sawest was but the sun shining in those pools.'

"'Ah, would to Allah that I were foolish!' cried Ghalib with a great cry, harsh like the drawing of a sword from a rusty scabbard. 'Am I to be deceived in that look, I who, because it shined for me in a woman's eyes a score of years ago, have lived since in this accursed marsh, far from tribe and house? Here every day has been a month, and every month a year, and I am old

before my time. Can I forget, who have drunk the dregs of shame and eaten my fill of bitterness? Too well I know, when such a love flames between a woman and a man, naught can keep one from other save one thing only—death!'

"'Nay, spare me, spare me, sheathe the cruel blade,' I heard her wail. Then with a great voice she cried aloud, 'Ah, to me, to me, Haddam, O Haddam!'

"My blood turned to water within me when I heard that shameful avowal, yet none the less with held breath did I strain my ears for a succouring shout. None came. Only the taunting echo, 'Haddam, O Haddam,' came faintly back to me on the still air. Then came a sobbing cry, and I knew that that which had been decreed from the beginning had come to pass.

"Long I waited in the boat as my lord had bidden me, long I sat weeping alone, until the sun went to its westering, the shadows grew long, the air chill and dark. And when a cold breeze from the north blew suddenly, I thought that all the *jinns* and *tantals* of the marsh were falling upon me, and in the grip of a great fear I seized my paddle, and fled back to the tribe.

"Next morning, when the sun was up, I came

with companions to the *ishan*. As we drew near the shore a man rose up, but it was not the figure of my lord. Haddam towered above us, his body naked and covered with mud, and with blood where he had gashed himself. His hair was matted, and his eyes were full of fire, and we knew not the voice which cried, 'Begone! I, I alone will bury my dead.' "

The plangent voice of the story-teller ceased abruptly. No more distant torches gleamed from the marsh, and the young moon, setting in a bank of cloud, left only the dying embers of the camp-fire for light. The rattle of a horse's chain, the grumble of a restless camel, alone broke the stillness, until a deep voice from the circle of listeners, low-toned, set the seal of desert approval on Hantush's tale of violence.

"Aye, 'twas well done," it said. And the rest, bred in the same stern creed, gave guttural assent.

Chapter XII

THE CHAINS

AFTER the greeting," began the Haji's brief missive, written for him by the village scribe. "If no messenger awaits you in Qala't Salih, go to Turaba by way of Umm Subaita. If he whom I send is there, the tribe will have carried, and he will show your Honour our summer place. And may you live!"

No messenger having met me at Qala't Salih, I pushed on to Turaba, and it was not until we were well into the marshes that I heard that the Haji and his tribe had moved to their summer quarters. This was disappointing. In the old days, journeys with Haji Rikkan had been frequent and easy to arrange, but of late I had found it increasingly difficult to get away; and now through the failure of his messenger I was to lose a whole day—or rather should have done had it not been for the good-nature of my two hired boatmen, who volunteered to travel all night while we returned on our tracks. This was

pleasant enough for me, who during the warm night could sleep where I lay in the *mashhuf,* but less so for the men who towed, paddled and poled the boat through the long hours of darkness.

Thus it happened that in the cool slanting sunlight of early morning we came upon the group we sought of low huts clustered on the narrow spit of land between the brown flood waters of the Tigris and the limpid blue stream which issued from the marshes. Across the river stood the mud fort once commanded by Haji Rikkan, now flying the 'Iraq flag and manned by a smart detachment of police. Few of the villagers were astir, but long before we reached the shelving bank Bahalul sighted our *mashhuf,* and ran down to meet us. His only greeting was the familiar flash of white teeth, but his wordless welcome had now, as always, more reality than the oft-repeated, flowery phrases of Jahalul.

The elder twin led me to his uncle's house. He did not warn me that I should find the Haji deep in grief. His *kafiya,* so seldom removed, was cast on the ground beside him, and a beam of sunlight, striking through a worn patch in the roof, shone on his bald head. With one hand he

picked up the dry dust from the floor and poured it on his head, with the other mournfully beat his breast.

Seeing me, he rose hastily, put on his *kafiya,* and gave me the warm and friendly welcome which I had grown to expect. He must hear all the news I had brought, and all that had befallen during the many months since we had met; but whenever the conversation came round to a journey in the marshes in his *birkash,* I noticed that a new subject was hastily broached.

When the matter could no longer be evaded, the Haji spoke out.

"I beg, I beg, ask me not to come with thee this day. Bahalul and Jahalul will take thee wheresoever thou dost desire to go."

I was now to learn the reason for Haji Rikkan's grief.

"To-day they come to take away Latifa."

I remembered Latifa well, a dark-eyed girl about twelve years old, the joy of her father's old age. It is not uncommon among the Arabs to find one daughter much petted by the father; and to Haji Rikkan this was the only grown child left. By his present wife he had two small sons who still played in happy nakedness in and out of the water; but the children of his earlier

marriages had all, except Latifa, died or been killed in battle.

To lose a daughter in marriage, even the favourite of old age, is no uncommon experience, and hardly seemed to justify the Haji's excessive grief; but his next words explained it.

"She is a *fasl* woman. They will be hard with her, she will cry out and none will comfort her; against her will she must become a wife, and her father will not be there to protect her."

This was the bitter truth. All the rancour of the enemies of her tribe is too often visited upon the innocent *fasl*-woman, and that this should be so is usually taken as a matter of course. Rarely—as in the Haji's case, where the beloved daughter of his old age was in question—does a stricken heart break the conventions of generations, and cry out against a barbarous custom. Only once had I ever seen any feeling betrayed on this question. As we sat at the evening gathering in the guest-house of Shaikh Falih, a great booming voice had broken into our quiet talk on *fasl* customs.

"It is a disgrace, a blot upon the Arabs," cried a venerable old headman, "that our women should thus be constrained against their will." Silence followed, and with eager apprehensive

eyes he looked round the assembly to see if but one other would raise his voice in support of this heresy; but the rest, with stern and unrelenting faces, remained unmoved. Who were they to call in question the customs of their fathers?

Jahalul, entering with his usual cheerful face, dispelled the gloom of the Haji's hut. He was the possessor of a new *mashhuf,* in which our day's journey must be made. It was already moored at the water's edge, and after duly admiring its clean, graceful lines I got in. The twin brothers, wading knee-deep in the clear water, pushed off and leapt lightly aboard.

"No gun?" asked Bahalul.

I shook my head. After so many months' absence I did not want to shoot. I wanted to pick up the threads of my old intimacy with the marsh—to spend a long day in renewing the old impressions of its solitary beauty. I wanted to glide down the narrow hidden water-channels, to cross the wide, wind-swept blue lakes, and to hear once more the ceaseless whisper of the reeds, that low murmur which is at once so familiar and so friendly, until suddenly, almost against one's will, one hears in its gentle and serene voice a note of warning, a suggestion of lurking danger, a hint of tragedy.

Bahalul, poling with effortless strength, broke in upon my thoughts.

"Whither?"

"As thou wilt."

"The order is thy order," he answered.

"To the Chains," I suggested.

"Upon my head be it," replied the laconic Bahalul; but I could tell from the way in which he braced his shoulders, and flung a brief word to his brother, that we were in for a long day.

My suggestion was a random one. I had heard, in the old days, vague references to the "Chains"; what chains, and why they were there, no questioning had ever been able to elicit. But whatever they were, I knew that they were in the heart of the marsh, and to the heart of the marsh I wanted to go that day.

The sun rose higher, deepening the blue water and the changing greens and browns of the swaying reeds. In silence we went swiftly on—silence hardly stirred by the small soughing wind, by the dip of the untiring paddles, by the murmurous voices in the rushes. On this sunny morning the tiny marsh flowers were at their loveliest, gleaming like jewels on the surface of the water, or half hiding their delicate pinks and yellows in the shadow of the reeds. Bird voices sounded

sharply. Occasionally we surprised a flock of "water-chickens," which with agitated paddling of their little black feet would flee to safety, the cranes and dignified herons following more slowly. Now the narrow channel broadened into a deep still pool, now to a wide and sparkling sheet of wind-stirred ripples. In places the water was hidden by weeds so thick and matted that Bahalul and Jahalul could hardly force a way through; in others it was clear and still, unfathomably deep below the powdery layer of pollen on the surface.

In front, the friendly reeds seemed to open of themselves to provide a way for us; behind, they closed their ranks in dark and threatening masses against the sky, as though prepared to oppose our return. The scream of an unseen bird might echo across the stillness, or a startled beating of wings die away as suddenly as it had arisen; then once more silence held the marsh. Here the reeds were taller: old, thick, and towering masses, so far from any marsh settlements that they had never been disturbed by man seeking material for hut-building, for buffalo fodder, or for mats. The solitude was intense—more intense than that of the desert. There countless tracks reveal the presence of man or

beast, but here the flowering weeds close up again, leaving no trace. Only very rarely did we come across a few reeds twisted together and bent—a landmark or wordless message from a marshman to his fellows, seeming only to intensify the lonely silence of the wilderness.

When at last we came upon a settlement of marsh-dwellers, it was a village so small, so remote from the river, that at first sight of us the men seized their rifles and leapt in among the reeds, from the shelter of which they could best defend their homes. The women, on the contrary, stared at us as placidly as their own buffaloes, hardly troubling to suspend their household tasks of husking rice, washing clothes, and scouring cooking-pots. The scene was gay with colour, good, hard, and primitive; yellow huts against a background of green, buffaloes and pitched *mashhufs* like black silhouettes in the foreground, splashes of orange and scarlet as the women moved to and fro. It was a typical marsh scene, and reaching for my camera, I told Bahalul to land me on the largest island.

The ground on which I stepped was covered with broken pottery, some unglazed, some a bright sky-blue. Fragments of all shapes and sizes lay jumbled together, with here and there

a flat square brick inscribed with cuneiform symbols. A little higher on the sloping ground lay a crumbled mass of masonry, with hints of columns, the whole covered with a rich dark-green glazing. All these fragments, uninteresting and unintelligible to the people who dwelt among them, were indications of a rich field for the archæologist.

I had taken several photographs of the village when a *mashhuf* grounded on the bank behind me. I turned, to see an old woman helped out and half carried up the bank by the boatman, who led her to Bahalul. After a few moments they came towards me, and I saw from the care with which they guided her footsteps that the woman was blind. She was bent and shrivelled with age; incredibly old she seemed as she hobbled painfully over the shard-strewn ground, her dirty garments sweeping unkempt behind her. Unlike the withered brown faces of the other village beldams, hers was pale, putty-coloured. So expressionless were her features, so colourless her eyes and lips, that the face seemed like one from which all life had long since ebbed, leaving an empty mask.

"Here is the Sahib," said Bahalul. "Speak,

O mother of many, and give him what thou hast brought."

The old woman took a step or two forward, stretched out a lean and bony hand, and fumbling for my arm, felt earnestly up and down my sleeve.

"Is he indeed a *farangi?*" she asked tremulously. A dozen interested bystanders assured her that I was.

"Take this, then, Effendim," she said, and held out a flat packet wrapped in cloth that might once have been white. "This was his command, that I should give it to a *farangi,* to another of his own kind. Now, the praise to Allah, I have obeyed him. Take it, and may Allah guard thee, may the All-powerful (His Name be blest and exalted) lengthen thy years!"

She turned, still feebly calling down blessings on my head, and was led slowly away.

With some difficulty I untied the tightly drawn knots, and opened the package. Inside was an old book, calf-bound; at some time or another it had suffered from damp, or might even have been dropped in the water, for the binding was split and warped, the pages swollen and discoloured. I opened it, and turned to the

fly-leaf; but whatever had been written there was now undecipherable. The next page, comparatively undamaged, was a coloured frontispiece: "The Author in his Travelling Costume." The cheerful blue of his voluminous coat and the red of his baggy trousers had come off on the opposite page, which announced the book as a "Personal Narrative of Travels in Babylonia, Assyria, Media and Scythia, in the year 1824, by Major the Hon. George Keppel, F.S.A."

So far so good. But how had this volume fallen into the hands of an old crone of the marshes, and why was it so highly valued by the unknown owner that he had bidden her hand it "to another of his own kind"? Touched with curiosity, I turned the pages, and tried to open the no small number which had stuck together. Many were illegible; some had passages marked in the margin with a faded greenish ink; others were lavishly underlined.

The word "Bussorah" caught my eye. "The abundance of water," I read, "besides irrigating the gardens, which it does effectually, might also be the means of keeping the town clean, were there not in the inhabitants an innate love of filth. Bussorah is the dirtiest town in the Turkish dominions. The streets, which are

narrow and irregular, are almost insupportable from the stench. Some houses are built of kiln-burnt bricks, but the greater number are of mud. From these project several long spouts made of the body of the date-tree, which convey filth of every description into the streets, so that a passenger is in frequent danger of an Edinburgh salutation, without the friendly caution of *Gardez loo.*" Fortunately, Basra has since mended its ways.

A few pages later came a description of a journey up the Tigris, most of it heavily marked in the margin. "The Arab boatmen were as hardy and muscular-looking fellows as ever I saw. One loose brown shirt, of the coarseness of sack-cloth, was the only covering of the latter. This, when labour required it, was thrown aside, and discovered forms most admirably adapted to their laborious avocations; indeed, any of the boatmen would have made an excellent model for a Hercules; and one in particular, with uncombed hair and shaggy beard, struck us all with the resemblance he bore to statues of that deity." Again, "Several women, accompanied by a host of children, brought milk, butter, and eggs for sale, and followed the boat for some time. The behaviour of these females formed a striking

contrast with the manners of the Indian women, and still more of the veiled dames of Bussorah. They came to our boats with the frankness of innocence, and there was a freedom in their manners, bordering perhaps on the masculine; nevertheless their fine features and well-turned limbs produced a *tout ensemble* of beauty, not to be surpassed perhaps in the brilliant assemblies of civilized life. True it is, their complexions were of a gipsy brown; but, even on this point, there may be some who see 'a Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.' "

It seemed that the unknown traveller had simply marked those passages which he had verified from his own experience; of himself they told nothing. I turned from page to page, hoping to find some clue in the faded green marks. A keenly interested observer he must have been, and evidently of religious leanings, for the Biblical allusions were frequently emphasized. Here was a string of references to the building and destruction of Babylon, all underlined. "Let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly. And they had bricks for stone, and slime for mortar." "The broad walls of Babylon shall be utterly broken." Was he a missionary, zealous for the conversion of the godless

Ma'dan, or merely interested in comparing the life of the Bible with life as it was lived in the East in his day? As I turned over the stiff and discoloured pages, I was struck, as he had been, with the accuracy of the Hon. George Keppel's notes, and the exactness with which they still tally with the habits of the people; and I subscribed heartily to his underlining of a description of a marshman's meal: "After crossing his legs and adjusting his robes with true Arab gravity, he proceeded to business by baring his arm to the elbow; he then grasped a handful of rice, sopped it in all the saucers, and moulded it into the shape, and I had almost said the consistency, of a tennis ball. Large as it was, this palatable bolus found its way down his throat, with the aid of a huge lump of butter, with which it was accompanied."

The sun was growing hot, though I had not noticed it until a grey-bearded marshman, whose air of authority seemed to imply that he was the headman of this isolated village, came up, and with a hospitable *"Bismillah!"* invited me to his house. I slipped the book with its unsolved mystery into my pocket, and walked with him across the island. Stooping under the low arch of the doorway, we entered the rough hut, to

find ourselves in what seemed total darkness after the bright glare outside. The hut, when my eyes grew accustomed to the softened light, was plain and bare like that of every marshman, headman or no. A fire was quickly kindled by the simple expedient of carrying from a neighbour's hearth a handful of lighted reeds, which lit up the deep copper colouring of the once yellow roof, bronzed now with the smoke of many hospitable fires. An old Arab with a lame leg began to busy himself among the coffee-pots; he threw a handful of beans into a sort of primitive frying-pan, shaking them over the fire and stirring, to keep them continually moving, with a rusty bayonet which was probably a relic of the War. The roasting was slow and thorough. We sat waiting, in the unembarrassed silence to which Europeans grow accustomed with difficulty. At length the beans were tipped into a shallow mortar, and the unhurried coffee-maker began to pound them, making a musical and rhythmic jingle as the brass pestle struck the mortar. From time to time the hut was darkened as the doorway was blocked by the entrance of a neighbour, attracted by the tinkling invitation. With a muttered *"Salam 'alaikum"* they would squat down in the increasing circle, only break-

ing the silence by an occasional *"Y'Allah"* uttered in such heartfelt tones as would suggest that the cry to God was extracted from them by mortal agony. Through the chinks in the rush walls came small sounds of whispering and tittering, as the village children satisfied their infant curiosity about the unusual visitor.

The marshman's hearth did not boast the whole series of coffee-pots which one sees in a shaikh's *madhif*. My host possessed only two, a large one of which the curving beaked spout was broken off short, and a small one black with age. In the first were kept the daily leavings, so that each fresh brew was made not with water but with coffee; the small one was reserved for the freshly-made drink, strong, black, bitter and pungent as the Arabs love it, whether in desert or marsh.

The long wait had given me time for further speculation about the old woman and her book. Idly, as I sat cross-legged on the one carpet owned by the headman, I turned over the faded pages, reading here a few words of description, here a scriptural quotation underlined. By chance I turned to the blank pages at the end—and started, for they were covered with close, clear, sloping handwriting, still legible except

where here and there a smudge of water had obliterated a few lines. The first words which met my eyes were startling enough.

"As I shall now within a few hours meet my Maker (for it is clear that these savages will not be long in making an end of me) I propose to set down some account of my adventures, thinking that it may by good fortune fall into friendly hands."

I stopped reading in pure astonishment. The words seemed unreal, fantastic, melodramatic even. Yet as I looked at the precise and angular writing with its old-fashioned s's, as I remembered the earnestness of the marshwoman, and the strange care with which she had treasured the book, my scepticism died away. I read on eagerly.

"I find myself strangely resigned to my fate, and, relying on God's mercy, have no fear of the hereafter. Fear I have only of the manner of my death, for which the preparations recall too painfully the stake and faggot, by which so many martyrs of our faith passed to Eternal Rest. These lines are written as much to provide occupation for my mind, as in the perhaps too confiding hope that they may by some means

reach him whose name is inscribed upon the flyleaf."

I turned back, remembering as I did so that whatever had been written there was now illegible.

"I thank God that I, being unwedded, leave no dependants to mourn or otherwise suffer by my death, which the following circumstances, together with the roving disposition against which I was so often . . . (here a few lines were obliterated by a smudge of water) . . . while making a friendly visit to a tribe subject to the Sheik of the Montefeik, I was surprised by an unaccustomed noise outside the hut. A number of the tribe, bursting in with shouts and hideous yells, seized upon me with every sign of hatred (where before had been friendship and mutual interest) and, snatching my pistols and cartouche-box, stript me naked, and cast me, bound hand and foot, into one of their naphtha-coated craft. Here they have brought me by countless mazy windings into the heart, as I think, of the Great Swamp. I offered much Buxis[1] for my release, but they seemed intent upon my life.

"All day they ran in circles, screaming as

[1] Backsheesh?

if possessed with demons. They brandished in the air their swords and lances, those that had any their musquets and matchlocks. Their bodies were nude, their faces dreadful with passion, their hair thick and matted. *τό τριχῶμα πεπιλωμένον.*

Again I could make nothing of the next few lines, but the story continued: " . . . night also was made hideous by their cries and by the beating of tam-tams, nor could I have slept if I would, since my body was devoured by swarms of musquitoes, and my skin sore and burning as though it had been flayed by its unwonted exposure to the fierce sun of these parts. Though thankful to be at least alone, I lay in misery on the hard earth, parched with thirst until this was allayed by the girl Haleema, who stole in towards dawn, bringing water and some bread of the kind that Sarah made for the three Angels. Once again she . . ."

I tried to turn over, but the leaves had stuck together, and though I separated them with the greatest care I could read little of the next two pages. Here and there a few words stood out, tantalisingly clear: "jet-black hair in shining braids, eyes lustrous and . . . youthful elegance and symm . . . but an innocent child . . . was

due to arrive in the frigate Allig . . . ssorah, where the English factory . . . in the godowns of Hamid Khan . . . thousand piastres . . . their additional demands to our Indian friends in cash. And indeed it is certain. . . ."

What was certain? I was never to know, for on the next page only one broken sentence remained to end the story: ". . . and seven bales are lying at Abooshehr in the Gulf."

That was all; but I had ceased to be incredulous. The ring of truth was in the last words of this Englishman who had faced his end so calmly, and had spent his last moments in thinking of his friends and settling his affairs. But the story was incomplete. What could have been the reason of so sudden, so apparently unpremeditated an attack by marshmen whom he had thought his friends? I decided to see the old woman again; she might be able to fill in the gaps in the story. Remembering her garrulous blessings, I thought she would probably not be unwilling to tell me what she could; and turning to one of my neighbours in the hut, I asked who she was.

"Halima the Blind," he replied, *"w'Allah,* she is long in years."

Halima the Blind! The unknown writer had

spoken of "the girl Haleema." Could this withered old hag be the girl whose beauty he had praised so highly? I remembered the very phrases of his description. "Lustrous eyes, jet-black hair in shining braids"—and now, "by Allah, she is long in years," the man had said. I called Jahalul, and told him to take me to the island to which Halima the Blind had returned.

As we slid between the low mounds on which the huts were built, I thought of my fellow-countryman paying his "friendly visit" to just such another village. The confiding buffalo calves, snuffing with soft moist nostrils as the boat brushed by them; the groups of men splitting reeds for weaving mats; the slender pitched *mashhufs* crossing slowly from island to island—the scene can hardly have been different on that calamitous morning, perhaps nearly a hundred years ago. And for sounds, the merry voices of children, the lowing of buffaloes, the hum of a *majrasha* husking rice, all drowning that warning, voiceless rustle of the reeds, to which he was deaf, but which I, with the strange story fresh in my mind, heard more clearly than before.

The boat grounded. Jahalul jumped out, and ran up the bank to one of the huts. He seemed

to have some difficulty in inducing the woman to see me again, for I could hear his persuasive tones and her fretful objections. At last she came stumbling out, and I went up to meet her. We stood together outside her doorway, her blind old face raised half fearfully to mine.

"From whom this book?" I asked.

"His name? I know it not." Her voice was thin, dull, and weary, and she answered listlessly.

"What dost know of him?"

"Naught, save that he was friendly with my tribe, and my tribe with him."

I fancied that she spoke with more life in her worn-out tones, and tried another question.

"How did he die?"

"Die!" she said. "He did not die. It was I who suffered worse than death. *Waili, waili,* for my eyes! The *tantals* left their homes that day ——" she broke off, staring at me with her sightless eyes.

"Speak," I urged.

"Effendim," she began, speaking more clearly as memory woke her dull old brain from its torpor, "I will tell thee all I know. Afterwards trouble me not, for what am I to thee, or thou to me? I have done his bidding, I have given what he gave me to another of his own kind. Now I am old and blind; yet I will tell all I

can." She squatted on the ground, and I followed suit.

"Be it known unto thine honour that near to Abu Saghair lies another smaller *ishan* which has no name. On it no man ever builds his house nor buries his dead, for it is the home of the *tantals*. There those evil ones dwell, never going forth from the island save on windless days, for they fear that in a time of blowing wind they will not be able to return. But that day —a hundred years ago it is; nay, by the son of Abu Talib, more than a hundred, for I am very old—that was a day without wind, hot and heavy and still. And the *tantals* left their home, and entered into the men of my tribe, taking possession of their bodies so that they knew no longer what they did. On that same day it chanced that he of whom we speak had come among us, as often he did, to talk and drink coffee in the house of my uncle. And the wrath and fierce anger of those evil ones fell upon the stranger; they burst in upon him, and carried him off to their dwelling in the marsh.

"At night they made *hosa,* for so is the lust for blood quickened and made more fierce; and they purposed to put him to death in the early morning. So they piled up rushes, and dragging him from the hut in which he lay naked and

defenceless, they tied him to the mast of a *danak,* and thrust him into the midst. Then they put fire to the heap. But I would not that he should die, and under cover of the smoke I crept in and cut his bonds, bidding him hide among the reeds until their frenzy should be past. And in order that the *tantals* might be satisfied, I stayed behind to scream. But suddenly—ah! suddenly a great red flame leapt out upon me, seizing my clothes and my hair, so that my screams were no longer feigned. I fled from the place, and plunged into the water. But I could see nothing; I was blind, blind. O 'Ali, the suffering of that day ——"

The old woman's monotonous voice had become a wail, and she beat her head with her feeble arms. The strange story, corroborated as it was by the witness of the book, was evidently true. But what of her explanation of the marshmen's sudden frenzy of rage against the foreigner? Could one accept it as a nineteenth century case of actual possession by evil spirits, or was she speaking figuratively? I had often heard the people speak of *tantals,* the mad *jinns* feared and dreaded by every marsh Arab. A powerful shaikh of my acquaintance had admitted to me, in lowered tones, that he had heard their laughter. But I had never come across a

case of possession such as those recorded in the New Testament.

"Waili, waili," wept Halima the Blind. "Such is the lot of women. I gave my eyes for him, yet he came not again. Long have I waited, but in vain; and now I am old, old and blind . . . " Her voice died away.

I ventured another question or two, but she sat in unheeding silence, reliving, perhaps, what may have been the romance and the tragedy of her youth.

"He came not again." This, then, was the end of the story. The owner of the book had escaped the dreadful death prepared for him. Grateful for his deliverance, ignorant of its price, he had perhaps fled to safety. Or might it be that, escaping from one death, he had found another in the endless mazes of the marsh? I should never know; the book and the old woman had told all they could, and the marsh would not give up its secret.

Halima, waking from her trance, rose and turned listlessly away to her hut. As she passed me, without a glance, I caught an almost inaudible murmur—

"Go, and may Allah protect thee in thy going."

Was it a prayer, hardly formulated in her

dim old mind, that the fate of the unknown traveller might not overtake me also? Unsuspicious, unafraid and confident, trusting in the friendship of the simple marshfolk, he too had wandered in the wilderness of reeds, alone of his kind. And suddenly he had found himself in conflict with forces of primitive passion which neither he nor they could stem.

With the book still in my hand I walked back to the *mashhuf*.

"To the Chains?" asked Jahalul.

I glanced up at the sun, now past its zenith.

"No," I said with a shiver, "to the river."

The Haji, when once more we disembarked at his village, was seated in the lee of his hut, surrounded by his rusty tins. He was intent, it seemed, on some primitive form of stock-taking, but the reckoning was evidently not a satisfactory one, for on seeing me he called impatiently to his wife to put away the tins, while he made room for me beside him.

"Allah grant there soon be another war!" he said, "for in these days there is no money in all the land. During the war men said with truth, 'with the gold they have spent the English might dam the Tigris in flood'; but now all are poor, all is dearer. An effendi who once could be

bribed with ten krans now asks twenty, saying, 'because of the English the risk is greater.' Of what avail is this twofold government? Has any good ever come of a mongrel?" Haji Rikkan spat contemptuously, but he waited none the less for an answer.

"A mule often serves better than horse or donkey," I said.

"True, true," he muttered, sinking back on his heels despondently. "I speak the foolish words of age. All men can see that the world has changed. In the time of the Turks murder was done willingly for a *majidi;* now, a man bearing on his head a basket of gold may walk from Basra to Baghdad, and none molest him. Of old, the shaikhs rebelled against the government; now they put its order to their foreheads, and obey. How otherwise, when the aeroplanes of the English fill the sky? By Allah," concluded Haji Rikkan, "the English are a mighty race, but they are no longer just."

I could not let this accusation pass unchallenged, and the Haji with some heat made out his case.

"If an Englishman plucked out his two eyes, a man of the tribes would still prefer him to a townsman of his own race. It irks us less, far less, to obey the unjust order of an Englishman

than the just order of an Arab *mamur*. Yet, in spite of this, the English prefer the people of the towns!

"Listen to my words! Should a *mamur* visit us (and his pay no more than two hundred rupees a month) his going and his coming, his comfort—they are those of the High Commissioner. A policeman will demand a bed, even if the house-owner go without; and if we say nay he will tear off his badge, saying on his return, 'See how the tribes have mishandled me!' and we are punished. The English are powerful; if they would, they could prevent these things; yet when we would kill the townsmen for their presumption, we are forbidden. *W'Allah wa b'Illah,* daily such things happen to us, yet the English turn the eye; and if we do but prepare to slay those who use us thus, both their eyes are full upon us. Is this justice?"

It was the age-old feud between tribesman and townsman, as rampant here in the marshes as elsewhere in 'Iraq. When I thought of the small band of Englishmen still in the country, daily accused in the towns of favouring the tribes at the expense of the townspeople, I laughed aloud at their surprise if they could hear the Haji's indictment. Haji Rikkan laughed too, and, his temper cooling down after his outburst, added:

"A strange justice! but that of the Turks was still stranger. Have I told thee the story of the Qadhi and the four partridges? No? Listen, and I will tell it thee.

"A certain Mustafa, by trade a *kababchi,* was fanning his meat in the market when one came to him bringing four partridges, and said, 'Roast these for me, and here is the price.'

"No sooner had he begun to cook them than the Qadhi came by, and seeing the partridges greatly desired to eat them.

" 'My son,' he said to Mustafa, 'sell me the four partridges.'

"He answered, 'They belong to such an one, and I have taken from him the price of their roasting.'

"But the Qadhi would not be denied, and because he was a great man and to be feared, Mustafa agreed to take them to his house.

"And when he brought them, he asked of the Qadhi, 'When the owner comes for them, what shall I say?'

" 'Say, "Flown away." '

"So when the owner came to fetch the partridges, that *kababchi* said, 'Flown away.'

" 'From the grid?' exclaimed the owner, and he began to beat Mustafa and drag him to the Qadhi.

"Mustafa broke from him and ran away. And as he ran there stood in his way a water-carrier's donkey. He tried to push it aside, but it yielded not, and thus losing his footing he was on the point of falling. To save himself he clutched the donkey's tail, and it came off in his hand.

"He ran on, at his heels the owner of the partridges and the water-carrier. Coming to an inn on the outskirts of the town, the *kababchi* entered, and ran on to the roof. They followed, and to save himself he sprang from the roof into the courtyard; and he alighted on the keeper of the inn, and killed him. Whereupon the innkeeper's brother rushed to the door and closed it: thus they caught Mustafa and haled him for judgment to the Qadhi—that same Qadhi within whose stomach were the four partridges.

"The owner said, 'I had four partridges, and I paid this *kababchi* for cooking them and for the cost of the fire. And when I came to fetch them, he said "Flown away."'

"To which the Qadhi replied, 'Is Allah all-powerful?'

"This the owner of the partridges dare not deny, lest he be called an infidel and kept in prison for five years; so he replied, 'All-powerful.'

" 'Then is he able to cause thy partridges to fly away. Why dost trouble this man?' And he fined him five *majidis.*

"Then the brother of the dead inn-keeper made his complaint, saying that Mustafa had killed his brother by jumping on him from the roof.

" 'According to the law,' said the Qadhi, 'if a man steals, his right hand must be cut off; if he kills, his life must be taken. Jump thou then from the roof on to this *kababchi,* and kill him.'

"And the brother replied, 'Allah lengthen thy years! If I do this, I myself am like to be killed. I withdraw my complaint.' The Qadhi thereupon fined him five *majidis.*

"Then turning to the water-carrier, who held the tail of his donkey in his hand, he asked, 'What is thy complaint?'

"And he, seeing that from the others a fine had been taken, replied, 'Faith! Oath! I am but one of the listeners,'—and he fanning himself with the tail of the donkey as he spake!

"I ask pardon of Allah," concluded Haji Rikkan, "for I speak too much. My tongue has no bone in it, and wags as it will. Has not each stick its own smoke?" And he relapsed into one of his long silences.

Chapter XIII

THE BURNING OF THE BAIT HATIM

THE story of the burning of the Bait Hatim came to me from two sources. 'Osman Beg, the Police Commandant, told me his version as he lay in a narrow hospital bed, his usually smiling round face pinched with pain and disappointment; and Saiyid 'Ajil told his sitting in his reed hut, his long, nervous fingers plucking continually at his beard in his distress at the recollection of the tragic events of that night.

In a Muslim country the descendants of the Prophet are to be found everywhere. No place is too remote for them, no solitude too distant; in the heart of the desert or in the midst of the marsh an isolated family of Saiyids may often be found, a self-contained little community rarely visited by outsiders, but known and respected for miles around because of the sanctity of their descent. Of such a family, established for generations on a remote *ishan* in the marshes, Saiyid 'Ajil was the head.

Haji Rikkan, himself paddling the *birkash* which carried his wares, arrived one evening at Umm Kosaj to trade with Saiyid 'Ajil and his family. His welcome at that isolated spot was a warm one, and he accepted the Saiyid's offer of hospitality for the night. The warm spring dusk fell over the marsh; voices of men and beasts ceased to echo across the water; at last even the croaking of the frogs was hushed, and silence held the *ishan.*

Suddenly the sleepers in the reed huts were awakened by a startled challenge from the watchman. A voice answered from the darkness. "It is I, 'Osman Beg. I seek Saiyid 'Ajil. The Peace to you!"

"And to you," answered several sleepy voices, satisfied by the reassuring salutation.

Saiyid 'Ajil hastened to the water's edge, surprise and curiosity overcoming fear in his mind. What could the Commandant of Police want with him at this unusual hour? His surprise was even greater when he saw, silently slipping one after the other out of the blackness of the night into the light of the torch held above his head, a seemingly endless procession of *mashhufs.* The flickering light, catching the stars on their caps and the brass badges on their khaki

uniforms, showed him that some of the boats carried policemen; in the others were tribesmen whom he did not know. All seemed dead tired. Silently the boats ran up the beach, and the men splashed ashore through the shallow water, to be hospitably received in the houses of the villagers, who were already brewing tea and coffee.

Saiyid 'Ajil turned to find 'Osman Beg at his elbow, and with him Jasim, shaikh of the rice-lands lying many miles to the north. The tribesmen, then, were his. The old man led his guests to his own house, and there, the formalities of hospitality having been observed, learned the reason of this strange nocturnal visit.

The Saiyid had heard, as had all the marsh-dwellers, of the evil doings of a certain band of outlaws, who had lately become more daring than before in their defiance of the law. A long series of unpunished crimes had now culminated in the murder of an important shaikh, and the government had determined to catch and make an example of the gang. The leader, one Bandar a Rahaij, was known to have taken refuge with his kinsmen the Bait Hatim, in whose retreat in the heart of the marsh he doubt-

less thought himself safe from justice. But he had reckoned without 'Osman Beg.

The Police Commandant of 'Amara was a zealous official, who felt that his abilities had gone too long unrecognized. Now his chance had come. If he could bring the murderer to book, promotion—even fame—might be his. He laid his plans carefully and in secret, and as he sat that night in Saiyid 'Ajil's hut it seemed to him that success was surely within his grasp.

Well might the Bait Hatim think themselves secure. Bitter experience had taught 'Osman Beg that, with the mysterious swiftness with which news travels in the east, warning of a government raid invariably reached an erring tribe in time for it to elude attack by moving swiftly away to another island in the unmapped depths of the marsh. When danger threatened, they could always post their vigilant sentries on every channel leading from the river; and the birds would fly almost before the net was spread.

'Osman Beg set to work to evolve a new plan of campaign. What peccant tribe would be prepared against a commander who, instead of attacking from the river, made a two-day détour through the marsh, ending up with a night journey which would bring his force across their

only channel of retreat? If such a move could be kept secret, success was certain.

With cunning strategy the Police Commandant made very public preparations for an expedition. Every one in the town, and many outside it, knew that 'Osman Beg was taking thirty policemen—the utmost his small command could spare—into the marshes. Maps had been studied, guides engaged, *mashhufs* borrowed from the rice shaikhs. It was common knowledge that he had been instructed to furnish an escort for a party of surveyors who were inspecting the Turco-Persian boundary laid down in 1914. Early one morning a long line of boats set off down the Chahala, mark flags, ranging rods, and other survey gear much in evidence.

'Osman Beg was evidently in no hurry, for he and his force halted at the village of Shaikh Jasim and accepted his hospitality for the midday meal. As the piles of rice were rapidly disappearing, a horseman was seen to draw rein on the opposite bank of the river. He had a message for the Police Commandant, he shouted; and a boat was sent to bring him across. All in the shaikh's *madhif* knew that the pink envelope contained a telegram, and all eyes were on 'Osman Beg as he opened it.

The news was unpleasant, it was clear. The cheerful countenance of the Commandant grew clouded as he read; he cursed the messenger, and fell into a moody silence. At length he asked the shaikh to grant him a private interview.

Shaikh Jasim, sending ahead a servant to warn his womenfolk of the approach of a stranger, led 'Osman Beg into the wide enclosure of which the four towers and high mud walls screened his women's quarters. They entered a small ill-lit room, and here, seating himself on one of the high wooden benches which ran round the walls, 'Osman explained his predicament. The survey party towards which he was making his way reported an unfriendly reception from the tribes on the frontier, and asked for the immediate despatch of a larger force than he had at his command. Unwilling to delay, yet fearing to proceed with so small a force, the Police Commandant was reluctantly compelled to ask Shaikh Jasim for a hundred of his tribesmen as a supplement to his own inadequate numbers.

The request was not one which pleased the shaikh. He was a timorous young man who, not having become shaikh until after the British occupation of 'Amara, had no legacy of a

warlike and independent past. To send a hundred men off on a martial expedition into the heart of the marshes, against a foe of whose strength he knew nothing, was not at all to his liking; and what was worse, it seemed incumbent on him to offer to lead his own tribesmen. Jasim's dilemma was acute: an hundred men were not enough to protect his own sacred person; he must offend Government by refusing, or take double that number.

'Osman Beg left the shaikh's fort wreathed in smiles. The telegram—the bogus telegram which he had written out with his own hand and ordered to be sent after him—had been more successful than he had hoped. No suspicion had been raised, and his force was now more than adequate for his purpose. The remainder of the day was passed in collecting boats, and in bringing in from the outlying villages the men employed to maintain order in the shaikh's name.

Early next morning 'Osman Beg's command left the rice-fields, steering south-east to make Abu Gusba, a large island halfway across the marsh and at that time uninhabited. Here the night was to be spent, a day's paddling on the morrow bringing them to the survey party.

But when shortly before sunset the weary boatmen reached Abu Gusba, they found that their rest was to be a short one. 'Osman Beg, drawing the shaikh aside, revealed in a few words the real object of the expedition. There was no survey party to protect; there was no hostility across the frontier: but the Bait Hatim was to be surrounded and punished, and Bandar al Rahaij captured, dead or alive. This was why he had wanted reinforcements, and why the party was now to make a forced march, travelling all night; for only by using the darkness to cover his approach could he avoid sending ahead a warning of his coming by every reed-cutter or buffalo-herd whom they chanced upon.

At this point the blood of some warrior ancestor stirred in the sluggish veins of Shaikh Jasim. He began to show a lively instead of a lukewarm interest in 'Osman's plans. How, he asked, did the Police Commandant propose to guide his force through the treacherous marsh waterways in the darkness of the night; how, when the attack took place in the half-light of early dawn, would the policemen distinguish his tribesmen from the marsh Arabs they were attacking?

'Osman Beg pointed out "One-fisted Shuman," well-known in the marshes as a prince of buffalo-

stealers. As the life as well as the livelihood of Shuman had for years depended on the rapidity with which he made his way about the waterways by night, the shaikh professed himself satisfied with 'Osman's choice of a guide. To prevent his tribesmen from being mistaken for the enemy, the mark flags brought for the fictitious survey party were to be distributed among them. Shaikh Jasim, satisfied, ordered his men to the boats.

Their fatigue forgotten in the excitement of a promised fight, the men paddled silently off in the wake of the leading boat, which carried 'Osman Beg and One-fisted Shuman. They were bound first for Saiyid 'Ajil's village, Umm Kosaj, only twenty minutes' paddling from their objective. The long line of *mashhufs* slipped between the high reeds of the water-channels, while slowly the setting sun robbed the marsh of its rich colour, leaving it ashen and grey like the face of a dying man. Night fell, and still the boats glided on in the soft velvety darkness through which it appeared impossible that even so skilled a guide as Shuman could find his way. Now and then there was a check, and it seemed that the leader was at fault; sometimes those behind felt certain that the channel had been missed, for the *mashhuf*-men had to leap into

the water and push their boats by force through the dense masses of reeds. But still the line of boats pressed on, one following the other through the impenetrable darkness by sound alone—the soft splash, splash of the tireless paddles.

Crouched in the bow of the leading *mashhuf,* motionless as the curved prow above his head, sat One-fisted Shuman, from time to time hissing out his directions. At length, two hours before dawn and an hour before the time allotted on 'Osman Beg's schedule, he turned to the Police Commandant.

"Umm Kosaj," he whispered hoarsely. And 'Osman, peering ahead, saw across the open space of water a darker smudge on the darkness, which he knew to be the huts of Saiyid 'Ajil.

In the smoke-filled hut 'Osman Beg's story was heard with breathless attention. The Commandant was proud of the feat he had just accomplished, and with reason. He had planned deeply and secretly, and now success was within his grasp. Warmed by the Saiyid's tea and pleased with his hospitable welcome, he threw secrecy to the winds. The difficult part of his task was over, he was within a few minutes of his objective; his men might have a short rest, and then the Bait Hatim was his easy prey.

Before the breaking of the false dawn, 'Os-

man Beg led his men away to cut off the Bait Hatim's only line of retreat, and to surround their village. Saiyid 'Ajil, watching the departing *mashhufs,* turned to his son as the last of the long line disappeared from sight.

"When they return," he said, "they will be hungry. Let each house bake bread, let every housewife prepare a meal. And buy coffee, tea, and sugar in readiness. Haji Rikkan's coming was indeed fortunate."

"The Haji is gone," said his son.

"Gone!"

"Aye, an hour since." And Saiyid Muhsin told his father how, while 'Osman Beg was still deep in talk, Haji Rikkan had slipped silently out and, unobserved, had gone to the water's edge, where the young man, following, had found him walking up and down beside his moored boat. "I am old, I am afraid," he could hear him muttering.

"Why afraid?" asked Saiyid Muhsin, coming up beside him.

The Haji started. "Why afraid?" he repeated. "Because of the coming of 'Osman Beg and his police I am afraid. And have I not reason? Soon, when they have drunk their tea and refreshed themselves, they will come down to their boats; and finding mine here, one will

say, 'Give me of thy tobacco,' another will demand dates, another sweet-meats. And at the time of paying, where will be the price?—for to take without payment is ever their habit. If thou wouldst not see me robbed of my all, I pray thee hold this sentry in talk while I make my escape, and Allah give thee the reward."

Saiyid Muhsin, yielding to the Haji's urgency, had engaged the attention of the sentry posted by 'Osman Beg. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Haji Rikkan wade silently into the water, and saw the *birkash* begin to move as gently and cautiously it was pushed from below. Almost imperceptibly it glided away, and was swallowed up in the darkness.

Saiyid 'Ajil was still shaking his head dubiously over his son's story, when the sound of a single shot rang out across the silent marsh. It was followed by a roar of musketry; the quiet was shattered by the bark of rifles and the angry buzzing of spent bullets over the Saiyid's village. Men and women ran from their huts and stood in apprehensive groups. For a flash the darkness was rent, only to close up again more densely than before, as first one Verey light and then another soared into the sky. Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the noise of musketry

ceased; a desultory shot or two followed; and silence again covered the marsh.

Saiyid 'Ajil and his people waited, straining their ears for some sound which would indicate how their neighbours of the Bait Hatim had fared. It was clear that they had not given up without a struggle the man who had fled to them for protection; but no sound came to indicate which way the battle had turned. No call nor cry was heard; only the sad sighing of the reeds was borne across the water by the dying night wind; no *mashhuf* came out of the shadows with tidings.

At last a faint glow could be seen in the western sky. It brightened and grew red as the watchers on Umm Kosaj gazed, and as it broadened they knew that the village of the Bait Hatim was on fire. 'Osman Beg, then, had been rewarded for his careful planning; the enemies of the government had been punished. As the day broke, the fierce light of the fire grew less; with the rising of an angry sun the glow of the flames died away, and only a thick, tall pillar of smoke lifted its black column high and straight into the air, telling all who saw it that the houses of the Bait Hatim were still burning. But from the village itself there was no sound.

Suddenly a slim black shape shot out from

the green wall of reeds which faced Umm Kosaj. It was a *mashhuf,* poled rapidly by two policemen, and in it sat 'Osman Beg. His face was white and drawn, a rough bandage was tied round his leg. The boat drew near, and the old Saiyid, unable any longer to restrain his curiosity, called across the water,

"What tidings?"

"Allah rip their bellies! They had warning of our coming," replied 'Osman Beg bitterly. "Gently, gently," he went on as the Saiyid's men helped him from the boat. *"Eh b'Illah,* how I have wearied myself in this affair, and all to no avail! By Allah and the Koran, I am indeed unfortunate! Of all my force only I am wounded, and for all our efforts they have escaped unscathed."

Seated in the open doorway of the Saiyid's house, a cushion supporting the leg which he insisted was only slightly hurt, 'Osman Beg told his hosts what had occurred.

"Where the reeds were thickest, and when we had yet to reach the only channel by which they might escape, there they opposed us. We pressed hard, but they did not yield. Then I outflanked them; but too late, for their purpose was achieved. We captured two *mashhufs;* they were filled with women, whom we beat,

learning then that the whole Bait had escaped to safety, and with them had taken their household goods. True, we burnt their village, but what are a few empty reed houses to these marshmen?"

A boat, slowly poled by two tribesmen, neared the *ishan* as he spoke, and 'Osman Beg in his anxiety for news limped to the shore to meet it.

"We have found one of the Bait Hatim, and have brought his body," said the men.

"Where was he lying?"

"Near the place where they first opposed us."

"No prisoners?" asked 'Osman Beg hopefully.

"They still search."

From the group of villagers which had gathered round the boat came the sound of a woman's weeping. *"Y'umma, y'umma!"* she wailed. "O wretched, O luckless! He went——"

"Be silent!" ordered Saiyid 'Ajil, but in too peremptory a tone.

"Is he of thy people?" asked 'Osman Beg suspiciously.

"No."

"But he is known to thee?" persisted 'Osman.

"Aye, known to us all," said the old Saiyid. "It is Haji Rikkan, the peddler, who came but yesterday to barter with us, and in the night fled

from this place for fear lest he should be robbed of his wares."

"But why thither?" asked 'Osman Beg. "Why to the Bait Hatim? Tell me, what are they to him?"

Saiyid 'Ajil could prevaricate no longer.

"The Bait Hatim are of his blood," he said.

In the silence which followed, 'Osman Beg, limping forward, gazed down at the lifeless body stretched in the *mashhuf*. It was this old man, then, who had carried warning to the Bait Hatim, who had brought to naught his deep-laid plans and robbed him of the rewards which might have been his. This frail and worn body, its quenched eyes staring steadfastly into the sun, had housed a spirit swift to respond, even at the cost of life itself, to the call of tribal loyalty.

"It is ever the unregarded stone which breaks a man's head," muttered 'Osman, bitterness giving way to fatalism in the face of heroic death.

"His kinsmen are safe: let them be grateful," said Saiyid 'Ajil, "and may Allah, the Compassionate, show him mercy!"

"Aye," assented 'Osman Beg, "on him the mercy!"

THE END

GLOSSARY

A list of the commoner foreign words used in the text.

'Aba—the Arab's voluminous outer garment.

Al—the.

Bait—house; section of a tribe.

Beg—title of honour in Turkey and some other parts of the East.

Bimbashi—the Major.

Birkhash—type of one of the larger boats used by the Marsh Arabs.

Chafiya—*see* kafiya.

Challabiya—small craft used in the marshes for hunting, fishing, etc.

Chaoush—sergeant.

Chiswa—present of clothing.

Dakhala—the right of a fugitive to claim protection from another, even at the cost of the latter's life.

Danak—type of native boat.

Dilla'—birth-gift.

Disdasha—a garment.

Farangi—European.

Fasl—agreement to compensate.

Fatihah—prayer.

Gusba—a long reed.

Hadh wa bakht—word of honour.

Haji—Mohammedan who has made the journey to Mecca.

Hakim—political officer.

Harim—harem.

Hosa—type of celebration in which the Arabs indulge.

Hoshiya—soldiers or police of one of the shaikhs.

Ibn—son.

Ishan—mound in the marshes upon which a village or a hut is built.

Jazira—desert.

Jinn—supernatural being or spirit.

Kafiya—the turban out of which the Arab makes his head-dress.

Khan—inn.

Kran—a silver coin; the monetary unit of Persia, equivalent to about eight cents.

Ma'dan—Marsh Arab.

Madhif—guest-hall; among the Bani Lām a hair tent, among the Albu Mohammed a reed tent.

Majarsha—implement for husking rice.

Mardi—high pole-like reed of the marshes.

Mashhuf—crescent-shaped small boats used by the Marsh Arabs.

Mashhufchi—a boatman.

Misha—spade with six-foot handle.

Mudir—Governor of Turkish village.

Mullah—clerk or secretary.

Mumins—professional men of the Mohammedan religion.

Nafar—a private soldier.

Padishah—title in Persia of the shah or king.

Pasha—Turkish officer of high rank.

Radd al madhalim—indulgences.

Sahib—American, Englishman, or European as spoken of or to by the natives.

Saiyid—professional man of the Mohammedan religion.

Shabad—stout pliable reed from which the marshman makes the framework of his hut.

Shaikh—sheik.

Shittal rice—rice sown in one place and then transplanted by hand.

Tail Bardi—telegraph of the reeds; rumour.

Tantal—an evil spirit.

Tisyar—protection.

Torrada—a type of native boat.

Yuzbashi—captain of the local gendarmerie.

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